

READER

The last idiot standing

Cartoonist Johnny Sampson finally got his dream job at *MAD* magazine. Now he's one of the only artists keeping the legendary publication going.

By JAKE AUSTEN | 14

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IN THIS ISSUE



CITY LIFE

04 Transportation Skiing the entire Lakefront Trail at a time when Chicago is reassessing its public art is a monumental journey.



FOOD & DRINK

06 Sula | Feature A Lettuce cook and her mom deliver a new Khmer menu each week.

NEWS & POLITICS

08 Joravsky | Politics Maria Pappas reveals the dirty not-so-secret inequity of TIFs.

09 Isaacs | Culture A former Reader editor pushes for answers about John Wayne Gacy.



10 Housing Barred from federal stimulus and living paycheck to paycheck, undocumented renters rely on community groups—but both are running out of options.

ARTS & CULTURE

14 Funny Papers Cartoonist Johnny Sampson finally got his dream job at MAD magazine. Now he's one of the only artists keeping the legendary publication going.

18 Visual Arts The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's latest exhibit preaches equity, but behind the scenes artists and former museum employees are demanding real change.

THEATER

22 History The legendary nightclub

Mister Kelly's comes back to life.



FILM

24 Wellen | Small Screen For filmmaker Caprice Williams, the Journey is just beginning.

27 Movies of note Billie Eilish: The World's a Little Blurry looks at the teenager behind the pop star; Pixie is a high-energy heist film; and The United States vs. Billie Holiday is beautifully imperfect.



MUSIC & NIGHTLIFE

28 Feature For Glen Echo, Azita's

first album in more than eight years, she played and recorded every instrument herself.

31 Records of Note A pandemic can't stop the music, and this week the Reader reviews current releases by Will Liverman & Paul Sánchez, Senyawa, Chris Crack, Chung Ha, Pauline Anna Strom, and more.

35 Chicagoans of Note Zak Kiernan, maker of dungeon synth and comfy synth

38 Early Warnings Rescheduled concerts and other updated listings

38 Gossip Wolf A new record store somehow opens in Evanston, Spektral Quartet host an online Q&A with composer Du Yun, and Sueves front man Joe Schorgl releases the band's new album from Cleveland.

OPINION

39 Savage Love Dan Savage offers advice for someone whose husband has been sexting his cousin.

CLASSIFIEDS

41 Jobs

41 Apartments & Spaces

41 Marketplace

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THIS WEEK ON CHICAGOREADER.COM



Trouble at Moody Bible

Months after allegations about the mishandling of sexual violence claims, the religious school has made few moves.



Into the void

Finding forgotten relics is never that simple.

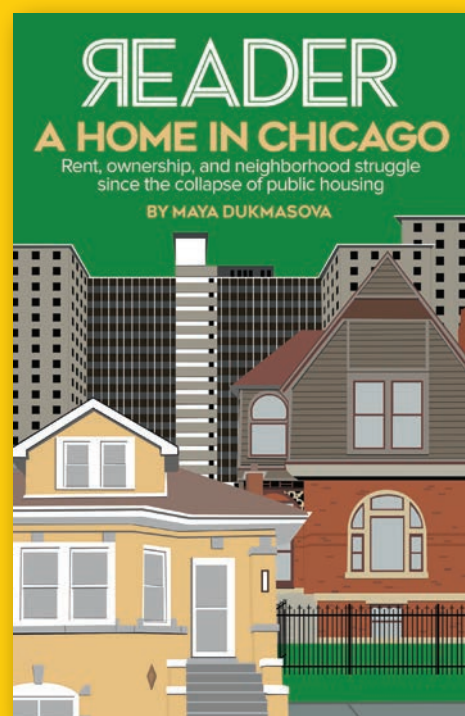


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A HOME IN CHICAGO:

Rent, ownership, and neighborhood struggle since the collapse of public housing



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BULL HORN



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Trust the movement, trust the method

Tanji Harper, as told to Jamie Ludwig

2020 leveled everything and everyone. There was civil unrest happening. There was no place to go. Everybody got stuck. Do you just give up and succumb to it all? Or do you push, do you ride through? What do you do?

There's no way I can let these kids give up. I need to lead by example. That means creating space. That means we can talk about it. That means we can write a song about it. That means, "Tell me your frustrations. Let me know why this has been hard." They all feel the same way. It sucks to not be able to see your friends and family. They look back at all the shows we were doing: "I really miss being able to perform at Lollapalooza. I really miss street-festival shows. I miss all of it." When things go back to normal and we're able to get out there again, I cannot wait to see their exuberance—it's in our rehearsals right now.

The majority of the dance stuff in the Happiness Club is all inclusive. The little kids, the middle school kids, everybody can do this movement. Even the audience might feel like they can do it after watching. Our amazing choreographer JC choreographs the group parts and makes sure that they're easy enough that everybody can catch on. We also leave room for free-style, and that's where the kids can be their individual selves. It's super important for dancers to find their own voices, and find out "How do I move?" And they also get a spotlight within the group.

There's nothing like a group of people clapping for you while you dance for eight

counts and do your thing. Even if you feel like you move weird, everybody is encouraging you, so you free yourself up and you don't have anxiety about what you're doing. And then you get better.

Dance in general—getting up and moving your body—is therapeutic. It increases your endorphins, and helps your mental capacity for memorization and concentration. It lifts your mood and your spirit, and changes you from being in a state of depression to not. Whatever it is that you need to release, once you start moving your body, there's a huge sense of letting go.

That's part of what happened when the 2020 election results were announced—the majority of us had a huge sigh of relief. It got people to want to play music as loud as they could, or dance with strangers. People forgot about the pandemic for two seconds.

Dance has gotten me through every single thing up through now. So I trust my movement and I trust the method behind why I move. 2020 was a leveler. A shift happened, and certain things will not go back. I know I will not go back to not talking about things that need to be discussed. I will not go back to biting my tongue or being quiet in spaces that are majority white. If I'm the only Black person I do not care anymore. Last year was the first time I started telling white folks, "No, I will not. No, I cannot." I won't revert back, and I've also started to be a lot more intentional about my own self care. And dance has been a huge part of that.

Tanji Harper is the artistic director of the Happiness Club and Blu Rhythm Chicago, and is an online dance instructor. She believes in the therapeutic power of dance and empowering people of all ages to get up and move.

Bull Horn is an avenue to give wings to the stories that matter most. This series, from Red Bull in partnership with the Chicago Reader, invites guest writers, artists, activists, and community members to share their ideas and amplify timely, crucial topics they feel are important now.





TRANSPORTATION

Skis and sculptures

Skiing the entire Lakefront Trail at a time when Chicago is reassessing its public art is a monumental journey.

By JOHN GREENFIELD

Inspired by this unusually snowy Chicago winter, I recently set out to cross-country ski the entire 18.5 mile Lakefront Trail from north to south, unclipping and hiking where necessary, and stopping to check out public art and other sights along the way whenever I felt like it.

On the morning of February 13, with the mercury in the low single digits Fahrenheit, I bundle up in lots of layers and board the Red Line in Uptown with my skis. Exiting at Thorndale, I walk a few blocks east to the eponymous beach, north of which the shoreline is privatized. Just south is the Thorndale Beach Condominium building, 5901 N. Sheridan Avenue, where Bob Newhart's psychologist character lived in his 1970s sitcom.

Skiing conditions are excellent as I shush across Osterman and Hollywood beaches, gazing at the fractured surface of the

semi-frozen lake. I'm staying off the Lakefront Trail itself since, unlike most bikeways in this city, the path is plowed by the Chicago Park District on a near-religious basis.

After skirting Montrose Beach and heading west past the harbor, I turn south to take the snow-covered gravel road that leads along the shore towards the Waveland Clock Tower. When the road reaches the Bill Jarvis Migratory Bird Sanctuary, I travel west to the Lakefront Trail to get around Belmont Harbor.

Skiing parallel to the path, I visit the colorful Kwa-Ma-Rolas totem pole, which is actually a replica of the original artwork by the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island, donated to Chicago in 1929 by Kraft Foods founder James L. Kraft. A few blocks south at the Belmont rocks, a longtime LGBTQ hangout, stands another monumental sculpture. Keith

The Alarm by John J. Boyle JOHN GREENFIELD

Haring's 30-foot-tall green figure *Self-Portrait* is the centerpiece of the AIDS Garden, which honors lives lost to the disease, plus those currently fighting to eradicate it.

Just north of the Diversey bridge stand three more sculptures, including two announced this month as "identified for public discussion," by the city-created Chicago Monuments Project, an initiative to reevaluate artworks and plaques on the public way and in parks. Mayor Lori Lightfoot formed the committee in the wake of last year's demonstration at the downtown Christopher Columbus statue, where some protesters staged a coordinated attack on police officers guarding the monument, and the force responded with a brutal crackdown. In the interest of public safety, Lightfoot "temporarily relocated" all of the city's sculptures of the genocidal explorer.

These two lakefront sculptures are among 41 potentially controversial artworks flagged by the committee for further scrutiny, apparently because they are portrayals of Native Americans done by white sculptors. While some monuments on the list depict Indigenous Americans as murderous or servile, to my non-Native eyes these two works seem to be respectful and dignified portrayals.

The Alarm, which shows a Native family listening for an unknown danger, sculpted by John J. Boyle, was commissioned in 1880 by former fur trader Martin L. Ryerson. He dedicated the work to "The Ottawa Nation of Indians—my early friends."

And *A Signal of Peace*, sculpted in 1890 by Cyrus E. Dallin, which depicts a man on horseback with a feathered headdress and upraised staff, was donated to the city by arts patron Lambert Tree with an explicitly anti-racist intent. He wrote that the monument was a tribute to Native Americans who had been "oppressed and robbed by government agents, deprived of their lands . . . shot down by soldiery in wars fomented for the purpose of plundering and destroying their race, and finally drowned by the ever westward tide of population."

The monument committee, which includes three enrolled citizens of Native tribes, will make a recommendation, informed by public input, on whether these pieces "warrant attention or action." That could mean removal.

The third sculpture also used to be contro-

versial, but for a totally different reason. Artist John Henry's *Chevron*, a lofty, blue windmill-like structure, formerly stood on private property at Armitage and Burling in Lincoln Park, but many neighbors complained it was an eyesore. It was relocated to the lakefront in 2015.

After passing the North Avenue beach house, disguised as an old-timey steam ship, I visit Boris Gilbertson's striking midcentury-modern Chess Pavilion. It was constructed in 1957 of concrete and Indiana limestone, with a *Jetsons*-esque canopy, flanked by five-foot-tall king and queen sculptures.

The trail is officially closed between North and Ohio due to icy conditions, but it's smooth sailing as I head towards the famous vista of the Hancock and the giant Old English sign for the Drake Hotel.

The notorious Oak Street curve, where high waves have nearly dragged many trail users into Lake Michigan, is a different story. But the lake is pretty much frozen here today, or at least totally still, so the only issue is navigating the ice boulders that litter the shoreline.

After crossing the river via the Navy Pier Flyover and following the curve of the shoreline, I continue along the snowy edge of Monroe Harbor, with a backdrop of Michigan Avenue's cliff of high-rises. I round the Shedd Aquarium, pass by the Adler Planetarium, and stop to refuel with chocolate chip cookies and piping-hot ginger tea by Soldier Field. (The thermos is a wonderful invention.)

Nearby is the Balbo Monument, a 2,000-year-old Roman pillar given to Chicago by Benito Mussolini to commemorate the trans-Atlantic flight to our city by Mussolini's air commander and Blackshirt leader Italo Balbo in 1933 or, as the pillar's inscription says, "in the 11th year of the Fascist era." In 2017, following the racist violence in Charlottesville, aldermen proposed relocating the pillar and renaming Balbo Drive, but they ultimately caved to pressure from local Italian American leaders who viewed Balbo as a hero. The pillar is on the Chicago Monument Project's list, so hopefully the ensuing public discussion will spur city officials to finally get rid of these tributes to murderous totalitarians.

By the time I reach 35th it's getting dark and my body is complaining—among other things, it feels like I might lose my right-middle toenail. I decide to catch the CTA back north and complete the trip later.

I return the following Saturday, February

CITY LIFE

20, after 18 more inches have fallen, starting out at the elegantly serpentine 35th Street Pedestrian Bridge. Just west stands the tomb of Illinois senator Stephen Douglas. The 96-foot-tall structure features a column topped by a statue of the “Little Giant.” Douglas is famous for arguing for allowing the expansion of slavery to new U.S. territories during his 1858 debates with Senate challenger Abraham Lincoln, the antislavery candidate.

The Chicago Monument Project has identified all five statues of Lincoln on park district property or the public way as potentially problematic. That’s largely due to reassurances Lincoln gave white voters during the debates that, while he opposed slavery, he didn’t support equal rights for Black people. His position later evolved, thanks in part to lobbying by abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Ironically, unlike the statues of the Great Emancipator, there’s little chance of this massive monument to slavery apologist Stephen Douglas being removed, since it’s on a state-controlled historic site.

As I head south on the revetment, passing by prairie-like scrub vegetation, the snow is excellent and the lake is totally still, possibly frozen through. At 41st I ski across Oakwood Beach and pass by another giant new bike-pedestrian bridge, a curving cobalt structure I’ve dubbed “The Blue Wave.”

Approaching the 47th Street bridge, I see a couple of teens flop down in the snow and then recline there for a while, gazing at the sky. By tiny 49th Street Beach, there’s a comfort station covered with a colorful mural of faces, flowers, and seagulls. Continuing towards Hyde Park, I see lots of University of Chicago students and families out enjoying the sunshine.

At Promontory Point I encounter the David

Wallach Memorial Fountain, created by husband-and-wife team Frederick Cleveland Hibbard and Elisabeth Haseltine Hibbard and installed in 1939. When running, the fountain provides refreshment for people, dogs, and birds alike. It’s topped with an adorable bronze fawn.

After passing the Museum of Science and Industry and 63rd Street Beach, at 64th I stop to photograph the sun setting over Jackson Park, next to *Fishing Eagle*, carved out of a dying ash tree, still rooted in place, with a chainsaw by Jim Long in 2014. Then I cross the Animal Bridge, which connects Jackson Park’s outer and inner harbors, created by Peter J. Weber and Thomas E. Hill, built in 1904, and adorned with carvings of the heads of hippos and rhinos, faces of water deities, and ships’ prows.

Not long afterwards I arrive at the South Shore Cultural Center, my finish line. It’s an imposing structure, built as a country club in the early 1900s, with a design partly inspired by an old club in Mexico City. Early members included retail tycoons Marshall Field and Montgomery Ward. African Americans and Jews were barred from membership in the private club up until the 1970s, when it went out of business rather than integrate. The park district bought the property, turning it into a highly inclusive community center.

The day after I complete my odyssey on skis, the temperature hits 38 Fahrenheit, and even warmer weather is predicted for the coming week, promising to melt all the mounds. I’m glad I took advantage of the primo skiing conditions while they lasted, and got an education on coastal, sometimes controversial, public art as part of the bargain. 

 @greenfieldjohn

The Kwa-Ma-Rolas totem pole  JOHN GREENFIELD



artist, writer, performer?

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Irresistible Khmer-style chicken wings stuffed with ground pork and bean thread noodles

📷 COURTESY MONA SANG

FOOD FEATURE

Mona Bella caters Cambodian

A Lettuce cook and her mom deliver a new Khmer menu each week.

By **MIKE SULA**

Sarom Sieng did not want her daughter trapped in the church kitchen, cooking curry and egg rolls her whole life.

“She wanted me to be happy and fulfill my dream and not be stuck trying to make a living cooking Cambodian food,” says Mona Sang. “She never said, ‘Hey, I need you to help me,

come back in the kitchen.’ She said, ‘Go do this because if you stay with me we’re not gonna get big.’”

That was eight years ago when Sang, who’s now 39, started working in the kitchen at a gyros joint, followed by half a dozen years at Lettuce Entertain You’s Ivy Room event space.

But now, just as so many chefs have in the last year, Sang is cooking with her mom again, back in the kitchen at Living Water Community Church in Rogers Park.

That’s where they’ve launched Mona Bella Catering, a union of the Khmer cooking skills that the mother brought from Cambodia and

the technical skills the daughter brought from the trenches of a major catering operation.

Sieng owned a farm back in Cambodia and a market stall where she and her husband sold food and clothing. But the Khmer Rouge put an end to that. Sieng lost her husband and two sons before fleeing to a series of Thai refugee camps with her remaining three children. Mona Sang was born in one of them, but while the family waited for a sponsorship with the help of an aunt in Chicago, they never stayed in one space for very long.

“We had to travel all the time because there were bombs being dropped on us,” Sieng says. “We were being hunted by the Khmer Rouge, so there was no time that we could safely stay in one spot.”

After a brief stop in a two-bedroom New York City apartment that they shared with another family, they finally found a safe spot here, where they joined the Mennonite Living Water Community Church, which sponsored their immigration.

“When we first came to the United States, the government would give us a box of food; the peanut butter, and macaroni and cheese, the powdered milk,” says Sang. “My mom didn’t know how to read or speak any type of English, so we didn’t know how to cook any of that. She would take side jobs cleaning people’s houses so she can get the money and go to the Asian markets in Chinatown or Argyle and buy the stuff that she knows. And then cook Cambodian food for us.”

Sieng made money sewing hospital gowns but eventually started cooking meals for other Cambodian families, and then later for baptisms, weddings, and other church events. Sang grew up working at her mother’s side, helping to cook huge trays of her signature chicken curry, egg rolls, Chinese sausage fried rice, and the sweet and sour beef soup somlar ma’chu kroeng.

Sang didn’t consider cooking professionally herself until she landed a cashier job at a gyros joint with an open kitchen and started watching the cooks at work. “I would start taking notes,” she says. “I wanted to see them peeling the potatoes or carrots, and how they were doing things different from how my mom taught me. One day I asked the boss, ‘Hey, do you guys need help in the kitchen?’ I just took off from there.”

Sang worked on the line for two years be-

fore she got hired at the Ivy Room, where her western culinary education was cemented. “It was huge,” she says. “We had weddings and parties every day. They taught me everything I would have learned if I’d gone to culinary school. It was great, but the one thing I sort of regret is that I sort of left my mom behind.”

The other great thing was that it was flexible enough for her to take care of her three kids after school. But when the parties stopped last March, she needed to find work that would allow her to keep an eye on them as they learned online.

To compound matters, Sieng was thinking of retiring from her own catering business when the pandemic dried it up, which lent an urgency to the guilt that Sang felt. “I’m talking to her and she’s like, ‘You know, I’m getting older. It’s gonna be sad that I won’t be able to pass this catering on to you so that you can show people our food, our culture.’ So I thought maybe I could continue. I started thinking about things that I learned from Lettuce and how to infuse it with Cambodian

cuisine.”

Beginning in March she started cooking with her mom every day, building a lengthy catering menu full of classic Khmer dishes such as prahok ktiss, a ground pork dip seasoned with fermented mudfish and the herbal spice paste kroeung, with lemongrass, garlic, galangal, turmeric, and makrut lime leaf; or chha trop dott, grilled eggplant stuffed with ground pork and topped with pickled Fresno chilis. Sieng’s egg rolls were on the menu too, but Sang also created a few dishes merging Khmer and western culinary traditions, like kroeng and miso-braised short ribs served with sweet potato puree; or her mom’s chicken curry paired with grilled pesto garlic bread.

She started posting these dishes to Instagram (@monabellacatering) in November, launching a different weekly meal delivery menu each Monday, with the ultimate aim of building a thriving catering business when people start gathering for parties again.

It’s a means to another end. “My children are Cambodian,” says Sang. “And they need

to know our culture. I don’t want my mom to think our culture is gonna die here in Chicago.”

Apart from Ethan’s Lim’s wonderful Hermosa, Mona Bella Catering is the only other fully Khmer food operation in town. And it’s pretty wonderful too. As Sang and Sieng work on each menu, they’re testing, tasting, and previewing dishes on Instagram: heaping bowls of salaw machu kroeung, a sweet-and-sour short rib and ong choy soup redolent of lemongrass and makrut lime leaf; or twako, chubby chili and lemongrass sausages with a fermented tang that takes about a week to develop.

Nam ban chok is an impressive feast that arrives in three parts, including a generous tangle of rice noodles, a deli container of thick coconut fish soup, and a garden of fresh raw vegetables for garnishing. Boned out chicken wings stuffed with ground pork and bean thread noodles are the chicken nuggets no mortal can refuse. There’s usually a pair of desserts, such as num ansom chek, sticky baby-banana-stuffed coconut rice steamed in banana leaf; or similarly num kom, stuffed

with sweet yellow mung beans.

Though it’s only been a few months, Sang’s repertoire is formidable. And in addition to the rigorously traditional food her mom taught her to cook, she’s continuing to roll out a few Khmer-western mashups, like a lemongrass burger topped with crispy pork belly, spicy mayo, and mango salad; and a twako sub, with peanut sauce and pickled red onion.

I’ve been ordering prodigiously from Instagram chefs like Sang and her mom since March, and there’s another thing that stands out about them and their food: they’re among the most generous. I’ve ordered for two from them twice, and the leftovers have sustained us (and some neighbors) for a week each time.

I marveled at this one evening as Sang unloaded the entire contents of an insulated Cambro container at my doorstep.

“Well,” she says. “We are caterers. We want people to have leftovers and share with their family and friends.” 

 @MikeSula



MINDY'STM

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NEWS & POLITICS



POLITICS

The last bastion

Maria Pappas reveals the dirty not-so-secret inequity of TIFs.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

For years, I've been really trying to bring the TIF program to life in an often-futile attempt to make this abstract concept tangible and real.

And now, in one fell swoop, Cook County treasurer Maria Pappas has accomplished what, alas, I could not do no matter how hard I tried.

She's put a human face on this abomination. Or to be exact—17 human faces. One for every commissioner on the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

Pappas has also done what officials in the Daley and Emanuel administrations told me couldn't be done—even as I had a feeling they knew, that I knew, what they were saying wasn't true.

Pappas had her office's computers sift through last year's tax data to determine which TIF districts in Cook County got how much in property tax dollars.

'Cause that's what feeds TIF districts, people: your property tax dollars.

My bet is that Chicago's planning department could get their computers to do the same thing for aldermen on a ward-by-ward basis. But why enlighten the citizenry when an unenlightened citizenry is much easier to bamboozle?

Before I get to the “winners” and “losers,” let me remind you—for, like, the one billionth

time . . .

Tax increment financing is the economic development program intended to spur development in blighted, low-income communities.

But it's become a reverse Robin Hood program, thanks to a flaw in the law that makes almost any area, no matter how rich, TIF eligible. So the program intended to help the poor largely helps the rich.

As if to prove that point, along comes Treasurer Pappas with her commissioner-by-commissioner breakdown.

Let's start by comparing the districts of Commissioners Dennis Deer and Stanley Moore.

Deer's Second District took in about \$348 million in TIF dollars. Moore's Fourth District took in about \$29.3 million, according to the treasurer's office.

That discrepancy has nothing to do with one commissioner having more clout or moxie than the other. It's not like one commissioner did something right and the other did something wrong.

No, it's that freaking flaw in the program. The one that makes parts of the Loop and South Loop (in Deer's district) as eligible for TIF money as portions of Roseland and South Chicago (in Moore's district).

One more time . . .

As long as all communities are eligible for

TIFs, the rich will always benefit over the poor.

Because the communities with the most economic growth generate the most TIF money.

And so it's as indisputable as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west that the rich will get more TIF dollars than the poor. Even though the program was created to help the poor. Ahhh!!!

Sorry, I may have lost my mind as I wrote that last sentence. Repeating this basic point over and over in column after column is a little like banging your head against a wall. After a while, you start to lose your mind.

I sort of feel like Ronny Chieng, the comedian, in that bit he does where he tries to explain to Donald Trump the difference between weather and climate. He holds up a cardboard sign showing the earth's rapidly rising temperatures in an effort to illustrate the difference between weather and climate. That is: just because there's a cold spell in Cincinnati doesn't mean the earth's temperature is not rising.

And he gets so exasperated that he smashes that cardboard sign over his head. God, I love that bit.

Where was I? Oh, yes, losers and winners in the TIF game . . .

Commissioner Bridget Gainer's district took in \$135 million in TIF dollars. Deborah Sims's got about \$30 million.

Gainer's area includes North Center and Lakeview on the north side. Sims's includes portions of Roseland and Morgan Park on the south side.

I think we'll all agree that the latter is more in need of TIF dollars than the former. And yet . . .

Thank you, Treasurer Pappas, for doing what Mayors Daley and Rahm said couldn't be done.

📷 COURTESY COOK COUNTY TREASURER'S OFFICE

Don't worry—I won't hit my head with my printout of Treasurer Pappas's reports.

Some portions of several districts straddle the city and suburbs. But Pappas breaks out all the TIF districts in each commissioner's district. So you can see which TIF district is in the city and which is in the suburbs.

And the pattern's the same. The rich get richer and the poor get bubkes. Relatively speaking.

For her part, Pappas says she's agnostic about TIFs. “I'm not saying they're bad or good,” she says. “I just want people to know the information.”

Still, you keep this up, Treasurer Pappas, and the mayor's people will pin your face on a dartboard—right next to mine.

“There are things people need to know,” says Pappas. “TIFs are the last bastion of the unexplained.”

Coincidentally, Pappas sent me her report at roughly the same time a coalition of Chicago business leaders took out a full-page ad in the *Sun-Times* pledging their support for Mayor Lightfoot's Together We Rise initiative.

“While the task ahead is daunting, Chicago has a unique opportunity to rebuild in a way that ensures we emerge stronger, fairer and more resilient,” they wrote in their ad. “Investing in our schools, healthcare system, and small businesses in key neighborhoods will not only lay a solid foundation for job growth, innovation and economic expansion. It will also help deep-rooted racial and socioeconomic inequities plaguing our community.”

Well said, business leaders—now check out Treasurer Pappas's report.

Then call the mayor's office and ask what can be done about—just to pick another example—Bridget Degnen's north-side district getting \$126.4 million and Brandon Johnson's west side one getting \$56 million.

We've got to figure out how to get some of the money from Deer, Degnen, and Gainer's districts over to Sims, Moore, and Johnson if we want to overcome those “deep-rooted racial and socioeconomic inequities plaguing our community.”

In the meantime, thank you, Maria Pappas, for doing what staffers for Mayors Daley and Rahm said could not be done.

Apparently, where there's a will, there really is a way. 📧

🐦 @bennyjshow



Alison True in *John Wayne Gacy: Devil in Disguise* 
COURTESY PEACOCK

CULTURE

True crime

A former *Reader* editor pushes for answers about John Wayne Gacy.

By DEANNA ISAACS

In 2010, three years after the *Reader* had been sold by its original owners, two years after the next owner had declared bankruptcy, and one year since the paper had fallen into the hands of a hedge fund, our excellent editor, Alison True, was fired.

True had been at the *Reader* for 26 years, 15 of them in the editor's seat, overseeing the work of investigative reporters like John Conroy, Tori Marlan, and Steve Bogira. During that time thousands of story pitches and drafts crossed her desk, but one in particular would stick with her. Submitted by Chris Maloney, a Roosevelt University graduate student, it told of a retired Chicago police detective who thought there could be undiscovered John Wayne Gacy murder victims buried in the yard of an apartment building at the corner of Miami and Elston, on the city's northwest side.

This submission had come in late in her tenure, after the editorial budget had been slashed and she'd been forced to let staff writ-

ers who authored the paper's lengthy narrative and investigative pieces go. The story was complicated and the author was new to her: sources would have to be reached, information vetted. "The little budget I had left would not support the kind of investigation that this manuscript would have required," True says. "So I sent it back to him, and offered to help him find another place to sell it. Then I got fired."

True moved on, but couldn't shake that story. A year later, she called Maloney to offer free editing advice and help in finding a publisher. After posting the piece online and deciding to sell it as an e-book, he told her he was finished with it, but had no objection to other writers picking up the thread, True says. Thinking she should check it out before pushing it to other reporters, True contacted the former cop. She also called an acquaintance she thought might be interested, freelance television producer Tracy Ullman. Together

they met with the retired officer, William Dorsch.

When no other reporters picked up on the story, True and Ullman started making calls and filing FOIA requests themselves.

"We were also finding that there was a lot of information already available that did not support the way officials had rolled the story out," True says. "The story everybody knew about Gacy was the classic lone-wolf serial killer story—a crazy silent weirdo doing this terrible thing in his house and managing to escape notice for most of the 1970s, until, in December 1978, some suburban police stumbled on his burial ground."

"We learned, in fact, that Gacy was extremely visible and gregarious, that he worked in local politics, had lots of friends, and hosted a huge picnic every year for hundreds of people," True says. Also, she adds, that the police had ignored information that pointed to Gacy (including a past conviction and arrests), and that there's reason to believe that he had accomplices, though no one else has ever been charged.

Gacy was convicted of the murder of 33 boys, 29 infamously found buried in the crawl space and yard of his Norwood Park home. But everyone involved in prosecuting the case agrees that there were probably more victims, True says. Given that, she wonders why (two inconclusive attempts notwithstanding)

there hasn't been more interest in thoroughly checking out the places around the city where Dorsch and others think some of them could be found. And why, when the mother of one purported victim wanted DNA testing to verify his identification, the county authorities fought her request to exhume the remains, and then, after she won that fight in court and proved that the remains had been misidentified, refused to accept her evidence.

This was more than just sloppy or lazy police work, True says: "We've come to believe that it was a deliberate effort to distort the truth." Why? Maybe, initially, because Gacy was a precinct captain with political ties; maybe, later, because numerous careers had been built on the resolution of his case; or, maybe because of a connection to a notorious sex trafficking ring operating in Chicago at the time of the Gacy killings.

NBC's Peacock channel has produced a six-part documentary based on True and Ullman's research, *John Wayne Gacy: Devil in Disguise*. Rod Blackhurst (whose previous work includes the documentary *Amanda Knox*) is executive producer, as is Ullman; True served as executive consultant on the series. Set to start streaming March 25, it includes old and new interviews with everyone from Gacy's sister and surviving victims to prosecutors Terry Sullivan and William Kunkle. Journalists Jay Levine and Larry Potash are prominent, and True, who's also writing a book on this subject, is on camera as well. "How many co-incidences can you tolerate?" she asks in the final episode, and then reels some of them off: "You have Gacy and his political connection, a connection between Gacy and a sex trafficking ring that's making pornography, a suggestion of accomplices, more potential victims, the property at Miami and Elston."

Each episode includes video from an extensive prison interview of Gacy conducted in 1992, two years before he was executed. Responding to questions from a former FBI profiler, and consulting a massive "bible" of his own research on his case, he looks convincingly guileless as he blames his lawyers for what he calls a faulty insanity defense and claims to have "never met" any of the dismembered youngsters found in his crawl space.

As his longtime prison pen pal, Craig Bowley, notes in the first episode, "He comes across as so darn normal." Just your standard affable schlub, with steady blue eyes and a "who, me?" air of innocence. It's chilling. 

 @Deannalisaacs



Eunyoung Jung has been here a year, Maria Teresa Sánchez more than 20, but both of these undocumented mothers live on the edge of the housing cliff. **BRIAN HERRERA**

HOUSING

No safety net

Barred from federal stimulus and living paycheck to paycheck, undocumented renters rely on community groups—but both are running out of options.

By **WOOJAE JULIA SONG AND ALEXANDRA ARRIAGA, CITY BUREAU**

The Housing Cliff is a special series about the COVID-19 housing crisis produced by City Bureau, a civic journalism lab based in Chicago. Access the full series online at citybureau.org/housing.

María Teresa Sánchez has no time to think.

She travels from Pilsen to Bolingbrook and back, nearly 30 miles each way, five days a week,

to work in a factory where she makes \$12 an hour. She spends hours caring for her husband, managing his dialysis treatment, and talking with his doctors. Lately, it's become so time-consuming that she had to take some days off work, which put a dent in the family's sole source of income. On top of that, she's juggling winter utility bills (the latest month cost \$197), a 25-year-old son who's staying at home with them (he's on house arrest waiting for a court date), and landlords who want

to increase the monthly rent by \$300 (they settled on \$150).

With the increasingly heavy weight of her responsibilities, in fact, Sánchez says she'd rather not think.

"It feels really heavy," Sánchez says in Spanish. "I tell my husband that sometimes I even feel depressed."

Eunyoung Jung's day begins at 6:30 AM in Portage Park.

Once she gets ready for work, it's a rush

to wake her six-year-old son and catch a bus every weekday morning. After dropping him off at day care, Jung (who requested to use a pseudonym to protect her identity) takes another bus to the northwest suburb of Niles. The wholesale fashion store where she works has had a steady stream of customers even during the pandemic, which she says has been a relief.

She and her coworkers get along well, and her manager lets her leave in time to pick up her son. This job allows Jung to pay \$750 for rent and \$1,000 for day care each month. In a good month, she has maybe \$200 left after paying for groceries and other essential expenses.

"I feel really thankful, truly. I'm so grateful to God," Jung says in Korean. "I've met a lot of good people at my job."

This is the delicate balance she's rebuilt since early November, when she found out one afternoon that someone at her son's day care center might have been exposed to the coronavirus. The center shut down for two weeks immediately.

"I felt really panicked. I had to return to work the next day," Jung recalls. "The only thing I could think about was that we'd have to find another day care center."

Sánchez has made Chicago her home for over 20 years, but she's originally from Puebla, Mexico. Jung just arrived from Gyeonggi Province, South Korea, a year ago. They're both undocumented immigrants who've been working and caring for their families during the pandemic, with little to no support from the public programs that have kept their documented counterparts afloat.

The COVID-19 housing crisis is growing in Chicago. A patchwork of eviction bans and piecemeal financial relief have hardly stemmed the tide of people who have been displaced or forced to take extreme measures to keep a roof over their heads, according to local housing advocates.

For undocumented residents, the limited government safety net of renter protections and modest stimulus checks never even existed. And while some have found a lifeline of support through housing and immigration advocacy organizations, many others hav-

“They looked at us as if we were pests. They wouldn’t even let us near them.”

—Eunyoung Jung

en’t. They end up living in shelters or in unsafe conditions, outside or in hotels, racking up untenable amounts of debt or giving up necessities like food and hospital bills to put money toward rent. After exhausting every other option, some even resort to leaving the U.S. And despite the promise of mass vaccination in 2021, local experts warn that the situation could get worse for this already vulnerable group—especially as service organizations are stretched to the limit and run out of funding sources.

Raising the rent in January isn’t the first time Sánchez’s landlord has caused her trouble. As the COVID-19 pandemic raged across Chicago, with many tenants unable to pay rent on time or in full, Sánchez’s landlord left her a note last fall. “She said, the pandemic doesn’t matter [and] she needs the rent,” Sánchez recalls.

Sánchez didn’t bother to look for government resources, as many are only accessible to U.S. citizens and immigrants with legal status.

This housing crisis isn’t a new reality for many Chicagoans, where the minimum wage is far below what families need to afford housing in the city. But undocumented immigrants often face greater barriers to securing housing because landlords can exploit their immigration status.

“When you’re an undocumented tenant, there are a lot of different limitations right from the application process,” says Antonio Gutierrez, cofounder of Autonomous Tenants Union and an undocumented resident. ATU is an Albany Park-based volunteer group that educates Chicagoans about their rights as

renters and trains them to work with their neighbors to collectively gain better housing conditions.

Chicago law guarantees most tenants, regardless of immigration status, with rights such as heat during the winter, timely responses to repair requests, and fair notice if a landlord plans to end or not renew a rental agreement.

Although landlords cannot legally discriminate against tenants based on their immigration status, most require records like credit reports, government-issued IDs, and move-in or security deposit fees for a formal lease, says Gutierrez. This forces undocumented renters to rent through informal alternatives like unwritten, month-to-month leases that landlords can simply end by issuing a 30-day notice. Additionally, federal rules prohibit undocumented residents from accessing subsidized housing and public housing programs, which already have lengthy waitlists, unless they’re in mixed-status families.

City law also has a small but significant loophole: it doesn’t protect tenants living in an owner-occupied property that has six or fewer units. When Jung shared the news about her son’s day care center with her landlords, who lived in the single-unit house where she rented a room, they demanded that she and her son leave to quarantine for 14 days.

“They looked at us as if we were pests,” Jung says. “They wouldn’t even let us near them.”

Not knowing how to respond, Jung hastily booked a room at a nearby motel. She spent roughly \$2,000 on housing that month: \$1,000 on rent and \$1,000 on motel costs. She and her son received negative test results. Upon returning to the house after two weeks, Jung saw that her things had been cleared from the refrigerator. Her landlords told her to move out within 30 days.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis have strained undocumented immigrants’ housing situations. An estimated one in three undocumented workers lost their jobs in the early months of the pandemic, and some landlords have used their knowledge of tenants’ immigration status against them, Gutierrez says. “It’s very frustrating to hear that landlords are threatening their tenants with calling ICE or immigration, or doing illegal lockouts if they don’t pay the rent.”

One ATU-supported tenant union, made entirely of immigrant renters, unionized

in June 2020 after everyone in the building received a 30-day eviction notice. Now, four of seven households have moved out since starting the difficult negotiation process last September. With mounting emotional and financial pressures of facing eviction, Gutierrez says, two undocumented residents who lived in the building for 13 years decided to leave the U.S. forever.

Fear of retaliation from landlords has forced some undocumented renters into “nasty” and illegally negligent conditions, according to Leone Bicchieri, executive director of Working Family Solidarity. “The last few years with Trump as president, I’ve noticed a difference in how scared undocumented people are to defend their workplace and housing rights,” says Bicchieri.

Jung left Korea a little over a year ago after her now-estranged husband confessed that he owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt from a mortgage she’d known nothing about. She felt she needed to take herself and her son far away from him to get a fresh start. After months of searching in a pandemic economy, Jung found her current job last July. She loves the flexibility and relationships she has made through the job, but even though she works nearly full-time, money is really tight. “Once I pay for rent, transportation, and the day care center, we barely get to eat,” she says.

During the first months of the pandemic before Jung had found a job, she struggled to make ends meet. Neither the first nor second round of federal relief checks was provided to undocumented immigrants like Jung and Sánchez despite ample evidence that they tend to work in so-called “essential” industries like delivery and taxi services or industries that have struggled financially, like restaurants.

“That was really a slap in the face to the communities who are working so desperately hard just to get by,” says Glo Choi, an organizer at HANA Center, an organization that supports Korean, Latinx, and other immigrant communities mostly in Albany Park and the northwest suburbs.

For undocumented immigrants like Jung and Sánchez, who are in such a tenuous situation economically, the pandemic pales in comparison to their struggles to make rent and put food on the table. Worries about contracting COVID-19 come second to having the money necessary to survive in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant.

“I’m not afraid of the coronavirus, really. If I get it, I guess the worst that would happen is that I die,” says Jung. The thought of having to stay home and miss work hours for both Jung and Sánchez has been their biggest concern throughout the pandemic.

When Sánchez caught pneumonia around the same time that her husband had COVID-19 last year, it meant she had to miss a month off work. Seeing the bills pile up was more worrisome to her than anything else, she says.

In Chicago, COVID-19 assistance programs were open to all residents, in accordance with the Welcoming City ordinance that ensures city agencies do not discriminate based on immigration status. However, demand far outpaced the supply—funds from the city departments of housing and family and support services quickly dried up with thousands of households denied. (Because the city doesn’t track program applicants’ immigration status, it’s unclear how many undocumented immigrants were able to access the limited COVID-19 relief funds, according to a Chicago Department of Housing spokesperson.)

A few programs specifically supported immigrants. Through private donations, the city and The Resurrection Project announced the Chicago Resiliency Fund, which has distributed \$1,000 each to 6,383 applicants who were excluded from federal stimulus aid. Illinois Department of Human Services funded a similar program in partnership with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, where 8,900 applicants each received \$1,500.

This left grassroots immigrant advocacy groups, like Working Family Solidarity and HANA Center, to fill in the gaps in local government services for vulnerable communities—something they’ve been doing for years, even decades.

But the current crisis has dwarfed previous problems. “Seeing how our community was affected by [the pandemic] was really heartbreaking because people didn’t know what to do,” says Choi.

Sheltering in place without a support network, Jung says she felt depressed and deeply isolated. But since contacting HANA Center through an ad in a local Korean newspaper, she’s found support through the check-in calls, a small community grant, and food packages that she received.

Housing sits at the very top of many undocumented people’s financial priorities. “It’s the end of the month, you’ve gotta pay

continued from page 11

your bills. And what people would do is, they would borrow money from other people just to pay rent,” says Choi. “They’re paying for rent, but they’re going into debt everywhere else.”

Sánchez says Working Family Solidarity provided her with a couple of checks for \$500 while she was sick at home and unable to work. “I paid the rent, I paid bills. Thank God, because of Leone, the gas and electric were paid and I didn’t get into debt,” Sánchez says.

Outside of their role in ATU, Gutierrez also works as an organizer with Organized Communities Against Deportation, an undocumented immigrant-led organization that fights deportations and the criminalization of immigrants and people of color. Much like HANA Center and other grassroots immigrant advocacy groups, OCAD has raised and distributed thousands of dollars in mutual aid funds since last spring. Undocumented families and individuals can request up to \$300 from OCAD’s fund every month, and Gutierrez estimated that at least 40 percent of recipients use it toward rent.

“People feel a lot of anxiety,” Gutierrez says. “I have seen situations where individuals would rather give whatever amount we give them to their landlord in rent, instead of using that money to get food.”

However, the stress of the pandemic continues and has pushed even these nimble immigrant advocacy groups to the brink.

Since the pandemic began in mid-March, demand for HANA Center’s services has grown so quickly that the nonprofit needed to expand employment counseling and offer multiple COVID-19 assistance programs in partnership with the state, including direct cash and housing assistance grants. Throughout the pandemic, HANA Center and ATU have created informational posts for social media, hosted Zoom events, and fielded calls from community members.

To keep up with demand, HANA Center has hired temporary contractors to work nights and weekends, says Jeonghwa Yi Boyle, director of citizenship, immigration, housing, and legal services. She estimates that the organization’s hotline received an average of 150 housing-related calls, texts, and e-mails a week between August and December when the organization administered housing assistance programs that covered rent, utilities, and mortgage payments for low-income immigrants. A majority of the 238 people who HANA assisted through housing programs

were undocumented residents, according to Yi Boyle, and she worries that funding for such programs is drying up. “I feel like the entire state is wrapping up the COVID-19 emergency programs right now,” she says.

Bureaucratic rules sometimes bar qualifying undocumented immigrants from accessing help. Rules may exclude applicants who can’t prove they need housing aid because they’ve cobbled rent together by going into other types of debt; who can’t list their home address because they’re in illegal living situations; or whose landlords refuse to accept the grant money to cover their rent.

Choi and his family, who are undocumented, says his mother experienced the latter when her landlord wouldn’t agree to receive an assistance grant as her rent. Without her landlord’s written agreement, she couldn’t apply for the program. In other cases, some renters use their limited funds to pay rent instead of utility bills, then can’t qualify for rental assistance. “It’s so backwards,” Choi says.

While Choi’s mother found relief through other programs, Yi Boyle worries for residents who are less connected to organizations in the community, who may not even know where to look for help. Even when government benefits are available to noncitizens, like local rent-assistance programs, Choi says undocumented residents hesitate to complete long applications for fear they will be rejected or face consequences for using government benefits because of the Trump administration’s legacy of anti-immigrant policies. Often they’re too afraid to receive “the very benefits that they deserve and that they are 100 percent eligible for,” he says.

While the recent news of COVID-19 vaccines has brought hope to some, the situation for undocumented immigrants in need of housing is unlikely to change soon. This recession has been the “most unequal in modern U.S. history,” and economists say low-income households and people of color will be the slowest to recover. For those who avoided eviction despite not paying rent, the bills will come due once the eviction bans are lifted, and housing experts predict an “eviction avalanche.”

President Joe Biden’s proposed stimulus plan promises an additional \$1,400 to those who were eligible for the last round of \$600 relief checks, plus all mixed-status households. But no undocumented residents them-

selves will receive direct federal aid.

While eviction bans and relief programs have made a difference, Gutierrez says, these temporary programs offer individual solutions to a collective problem. Instead of addressing why housing should be a human right in the U.S., the conversation becomes, “If you can apply for this, you should be able to, and if you didn’t get it, then that’s too bad, you’re still on your own,” Gutierrez says. At the end of the day, Choi says the government must provide stronger, broader relief measures and extend citizenship to everyone in the country.

A few proposed laws may protect tenants or limit the harm caused by evictions. If Chicago passes a “just cause for eviction” law, which exists in other large cities, landlords must give a reason for evicting a tenant or deciding not to renew a lease and provide moving assistance if the landlord evicts a tenant for a reason that isn’t the tenant’s fault. A proposed state bill would seal some tenants’ eviction records.

But with the future of those laws unclear, undocumented immigrants are finding ways to organize and defend themselves against eviction together.

The Chicago Tenants Movement, a coalition of housing justice advocates that includes ATU, formed this summer to advocate for policy changes, to refer renters to assistance programs, and to help tenants organize with their neighbors. They encourage renters to solve shared problems like maintenance issues, rising rents, and no-cause evictions as a group, rather than alone. During the pandemic, ATU members have stopped evictions against undocumented residents and others while connecting hundreds of people to online resources and leading the growing tenant-organizing movement nationwide with demands like rent cancellation and long-term rent control.

Gutierrez says that although many people learned about tenant organizing for the first time in 2020, ATU has been building a safety net for vulnerable tenants—especially Spanish-speaking immigrants—since 2016. The group takes special care to work through the power dynamics between tenants and organizers along the lines of language, race, and class. “We have seen in the last couple of years a huge shift in individuals understanding the power of collective organizing, and these union formations start becoming more of an understood action,” Gutierrez says.

The federal moratorium on evictions is approaching at the end of March, and as of press time, the state moratorium ends March 6. As policies fail to prevent people from falling into housing instability during the pandemic, more people are seeking support through community organizations and with each other, and despite the difficulties, immigrants like Jung and Sánchez are determined to stay.

Sánchez and her husband have lived in Pilsen for 20 years; it’s where they first met, and it’s where they raised their son, a graffiti artist, who has a tattoo of the neighborhood name. They’ve lived in a two-bedroom apartment above a restaurant for nearly four years.

“We don’t want to leave, but without a way, we might have to,” Sánchez says. “The rent here is too expensive. There are two-bedroom apartments that go up to \$1,500 or \$2,000.”

When Sánchez first moved to the U.S. and to Chicago, she didn’t think life would be so difficult. At the time she already had four children and was pregnant with her youngest son. One of her children has been deported.

“The situation is critical, being an immigrant,” she says. “You think it’s going to be ‘pura vida’ but it’s not. If you don’t work, you don’t eat, you don’t pay rent, and where would you live?”

After a year of being forced to move repeatedly and navigate a new country during a pandemic, Jung has found small moments of peace for herself and her son. She found a new day care and now rents a room in a different house where they have more privacy. Jung enjoys long bus rides to H Mart in Niles and appreciates how bus drivers lower the platform for riders with physical disabilities and children like her son. And while her son naps, she observes the diverse group of Chicagoans who ride with her.

“Honestly, we take the bus to kill time. I can look out the window and have some moments to myself,” Jung says.

When the pandemic ends, Jung says she really wants to make friends and find a babysitter to help take care of her son. Her parents and younger brother, with whom she’s close, have asked her to return to Korea multiple times.

“I think about them a lot. So much, so much,” she says. “They tell me it’s not too late to come back, but I have no intention of leaving, not yet.” ■

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POETRY CORNER

“until i see u again”

By Nishat Ahmed

until i see you again i will be good i mean bad i mean i will
be waiting by the door to see you standing there when the
grandfather clock chimes i will pit the olives and i wont let
them touch your plate i will make the bed and i wont disturb
your place in it each sunset that casts its glow is another
calendar day crossed off until i see you again each dream i have
is my desperate attempt to touch you until i see you again i
will not light a candle again while i can still smell you in the air
and on my sheets i will wash this body eventually but not just
yet not while your sweat still lingers i will muddle the mint i
will pour vodka and ginger beer over ice i will lay the fruit and
meat on the wood on the table i will lay myself down and hold
anything that might resemble you until i see you again i will
lean over again and again to kiss you on the head and until i see
you again i will be surprised that my lips touch air

Nishat Ahmed is a Bangladeshi-American residing in the Midwest. He is an Illinois native with a deep love for Fall Out Boy, *The Notebook*, and Chipotle. He received his MFA in poetry from Old Dominion University. His first chapbook, “Field Guide for End Days”, is out now from Finishing Line Press. His second chapbook, “Brown Boy”, is forthcoming from Porkbelly Press.

Poem curated by José Olivarez: José Olivarez is the son of Mexican immigrants. His debut book of poems, *Citizen Illegal*, was a finalist for the PEN/ Jean Stein Award and a winner of the 2018 Chicago Review of Books Poetry Prize.

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Highlighting Chicago’s outstanding writers
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ARTS & CULTURE



FUNNY PAPERS

The last idiot standing

Cartoonist Johnny Sampson finally got his dream job at *MAD* magazine. Now he's one of the only artists keeping the legendary publication going.

By JAKE AUSTEN

Johnny Sampson does not draw superheroes, but he does have an origin. His origin story, self-published in a beautifully designed, humorous, autobiographical mini-comic, tells the tale of how he became a cartoonist—and came to paint the *MAD* magazine Fold-In.

In *Tru-ly MAD-ly*, the Chicago illustrator gets an assignment in 2013 from the editors of Pitchfork's new magazine, *The Pitchfork Review*, to duplicate *MAD*'s secret weapon: the Fold-In, an intricately designed transformer painting invented by *MAD*'s scientist of cartooning, Al Jaffee. Our hero creates a joke in which handlebar-mustached cosplaying

hipsters engage in anachronistic Victorian-era leisure. When the page is folded it reveals a hidden image of Jaffee himself, sitting on a toilet holding the most anachronistic leisure item of all: a print periodical!

Like most irreverent nerds, Sampson grew up worshipping *MAD*, so he sends a copy to Jaffee, along with a gushing fan letter. Months later he receives an envelope with familiar handwriting.

"Couldna done better myself," Jaffee writes. "In fact, I think you should consider doing this more often. What I mean is, I'm in my nineties and *Mad* will need someone to continue the feature. If you are in any way interested I'll

introduce you to the editorial staff."

Stunned, the illustrator writes back and the friendly legend keeps his promise. Visiting New York, he meets with *MAD*'s art director, Sam Viviano, who assures him that the spry Jaffee is not near retirement, but he is invited to submit cartoons. He then journeys to Jaffee's lair to meet his hero. Jaffee reveals his own origin, shares his secrets, and tells his new friend, "You and I are kindred spirits." At that point the 40-year-old comics virgin, who up until then had devoted his talents to storyboards, gig posters, and illustrations, realizes his life has changed. He soon is doing gag panels for *MAD*, comics for *Vice*, and a recurring strip for *The Stranger*. He becomes Johnny Sampson . . . cartoonist!

Sampson was born in 1974 in Atlanta, Georgia, and in 1980 his family moved to Wildwood, Illinois, a north suburb near the Gurnee Mills mall, where he worked while in high school. He attended University of Illinois in Champaign, earning a BFA in painting. He returned to Chicago, intent on pursu-

ing a fine arts career, but when a roommate studying film at Columbia asked him to create storyboards, Sampson found the process fit his skill set, and that creating art that was functional and appreciated was gratifying. In 2001 his then-girlfriend and he moved to California, where Johnny hustled storyboarding gigs through Craigslist.

Never making significant industry connections, Sampson and his now-wife returned to Chicago in 2006, and he soon found storyboarding for advertising was a much better fit, in part because instead of "shooting boards," advertisers need "pitch boards" to sell concepts to clients, thus Sampson's clean-lined, retro-cartoon style was more valued. But mainly he liked the money. "The firm handled the Wrigley accounts," he recalls, "so I was doing tons of storyboards for gum commercials and it was magical. I was also doing gig posters for bands who had no budget, but it's fine 'cause I just got 1,200 bucks for drawing eight panels. But then, when the financial crisis hit, it all just disappeared."

Sampson comes from a musical family—his

Johnny Sampson  KRISTAN LIEB

dad played bluegrass and his older brother Dave is a professional guitarist, playing with Charles Earland and Lauryn Hill, and is currently a member of Chicago actor/musician/*Masked Dancer* host Craig Robinson's band Nasty Delicious. Johnny played and recorded in 90s bands Lunkhead and Pistolero. He credits some of his art's aesthetics to the DIY vibe of garage rock, early country, and rockabilly, and his artistic style draws heavily upon pop-culture imagery.

His relationship with music got him into the screen-printed gig poster scene. He started working with Steve Walters at Screwball Press, and in 2011 joined the studio space/gallery Rational Park. That year he also created a non-band poster that unlocked his potential as a cartoonist. "Chicago – A Love Story," an illustrated laundry list of gripes about potholes, Cubs fans, and dibs, is a classic of Chicago underground comics, even if Sampson did not recognize it as a comic at the time.

For someone who is so good at cartooning and now makes mini-comics himself, it is amazing how remote Sampson's relationship with comics and zines has been historically. As a punk teen he created humorous flyers for his band, but didn't read or make zines. He recalls visiting spectacular comics shops in Los Angeles and just not being interested in the publications. But there has been one exception.

"As a youth," he says, "I remember seeing my brother's *MAD* magazines, seeing my first Fold-In, and just really reacting to the artwork, it had a real visceral impact on me. It was about women in the military . . . all these masculine soldiers, they're sweating, soldiers being soldiers. Then when you fold it in, the shape of the helmets and the shoulders and stuff turned into a woman's rear end and her legs, and I couldn't articulate it at the time, but the contrast between the two scenes was really like . . . *Whoa!*"

That "*whoa*" is why meeting Jaffee was life changing. Sampson had been piecing together freelance work (including a few covers for the *Reader* several owners ago), but his focus on being a professional creator intensified. Starting in 2016 he began self-publishing, and his gag panels began appearing in *MAD*. The story Sampson told in *Tru-ly MAD-ly* was accurate, but Jaffee did not have the authority to assign his successor. Still, this unbelievable dream seemed possible, especially when *MAD*'s ed-

itor, Bill Morrison, told him he was in line to take the position. "A line of one."

Al Jaffee turns 100 next Sunday. He retired only last year, four years after Guinness World Records recognized his achieving the "longest career as a comics artist." Young Jaffee relied on the funnies to get him through a complicated childhood (family drama led to a series of jarring migrations between his native America and Lithuania). Settling in New York, his comics obsession paid off when he tested into the inaugural 1936 class of the LaGuardia School of Music and Art, where he met future *MAD* creator Harvey Kurtzman and bonded with cartoonist Will Elder. In 1942 Jaffee went pro, writing and drawing funny animal comics for Stan Lee. Between 1944 and 1956 he created more than 500 stories featuring Patsy Walker, a redheaded teen a la Betty and Veronica. Though his kiddie comics were good, Jaffee's gifts would not shine until he joined the pages of Kurtzman's cultural colossus.

MAD's birth was the culmination of a series of triumphs and tragedies that defined the industry. Max Gaines invented comic books in 1933, and a decade later sold his stake in *Superman*'s publisher. He founded EC (Educational Comics), publisher of *Picture Stories From the Bible*. In 1947 Gaines died in a boating accident and his son William took over, changed the "E" to "Entertaining," and created spectacular horror, sci-fi, and war comics that combined gallows humor, O. Henry-style twists, and riveting artwork. Gaines and Al Feldstein scripted nearly all the tales of crypts, fear, and weird science, with the exception of Kurtzman's war comics. A quixotic perfectionist, Kurtzman scripted each story, exactly composed every panel, and laboriously researched weapons and uniforms. These processes made his work financially unrewarding, so Gaines offered him a humor title requiring less research.

Kurtzman created *MAD*, a comic book that satirized shows, movies, politicians (most scathingly Joseph McCarthy), and comics. It was an instant sensation thanks to Kurtzman's Borscht Belt silliness/cynicism, Elder's manic ten-jokes-per-square-inch art, and Wally Wood's seductive draftsmanship. Kurtzman's sprinklings of faux-Yiddish made the magazine seem naughty and low. While *MAD*'s subsequent reputation as the Big Bang of subversive satire is an exaggeration (wasn't every court jester irreverent?), its influence was monumental. Because it targeted ado-

lescents, for a significant portion of the 20th century, *MAD* was many moldable minds' first exposure to institutions being mocked. Those minds went on to make underground comics, *National Lampoon*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Onion*, *The Daily Show*, and so much more.

The 50s being the 50s, congressional hearings were held to see if comics corrupted kids, and EC being EC (a company that once published a story in which a murdered baseball player's teammates avenged him by playing a game with his murderer's entrails as baselines), Gaines testified that ax decapitation could be tasteful. The industry imposed a code which put EC's comics out to pasture, but Kurtzman converted *MAD* to a magazine outside of code restrictions, which flourished. After unsuccessfully demanding a controlling ownership share, Kurtzman left *MAD*.

Just before Kurtzman departed Jaffee entered the fold (the only artist to work for every editor). He did ad parodies and visual gags, specializing in convincingly-diagrammed absurdist gadgets. But his greatest innovation premiered in the June 1964 issue. His low budget riff on *Playboy*'s centerfolds and *National Geographic*'s fold-out maps was the Fold-In, origami alchemy in which a lush painted page, when folded in on itself at prescribed points, reveals a hidden visual punchline. 1968's "What Source Of Explosive Energy Has The United States Developed" shows a nuclear blast decimating a city, which folds into a Black Power fist. 1975's "Where Has The Most Shocking Rise In Crime Taken Place" shows a mugging in front of a storefront, but when folded the architecture transmogrifies into a corrupt police officer. The Fold-In became one of *MAD*'s signatures (good luck finding unmangled back issues) and proved fairly inimitable, as its originality felt proprietary and its complexity was difficult to duplicate. It also contained spectacular art beyond clever design. Because the unfolded page often featured an array of small figures, densely arranged to disappear upon folding, comics scholar Kerry Stoper astutely compares these to fantastic Hieronymus Bosch panels.

Thanks to the work of Jaffee and his peers, *MAD* hit its highest paid circulation in 1974, averaging 2.4 million copies. The September 1973 issue, parodying *The Poseidon Adventure* ("Poopsidedown Adventure") sold 2.8 million. Because of its schoolyard/contraband nature, the pass along rate was as high as ten million. According to Paul Levitz, who oversaw *MAD* following Gaines's death in 1992, in the years surrounding its heyday *MAD* had the highest

pay rate for comics/humor in the industry (by a factor of ten times, or greater), with the exception of *Playboy*, which offered comparable rates. This compensation translated into quality, as brilliant draftsmen like caricaturist Mort Drucker, hinged-foot cartoonist Don Martin, prolific pantomimist Sergio Aragonés, and Jaffee remained loyal contributors (all were freelancers, none owning the rights to their work, making reprints cost effective). As further motivation, contributors (self-owned in the masthead as "The Usual Gang of Idiots") who reached annual page goals were invited on grand, debauched trips to foreign lands.

But this is not the *MAD* magazine that welcomed Sampson. Factors affecting all print publications led to a decrease in circulation and influence, and by the mid-90s, when the *MAD*-inspired *Simpsons* ruled the irreverence roost, circulation was around 300,000. When Johnny visited the New York office two decades later, he was one of the last creators entering its doors. While *MAD* maintained healthy subscription numbers for a 21st-century periodical, it was a demographic disaster. According to Bill Morrison, the *Simpsons Comics* veteran who was hired to help move *MAD* to Burbank in 2017 and bring in younger, more diverse creators, editors, and readers, "*MAD* was being bought and read by white male boys 11 to 16. Then there was a sharp cutoff when most boys discover girls. It picked up at about age 45 to 60, again with white males either having a nostalgic fondness or wanting to make sure they got every issue." Some inroads were made with new readers during Morrison's brief reign, but AT&T's 2018 acquisition of WarnerMedia (Gaines sold the company in the early 60s, merging EC with Warner Brothers and DC Comics) led to a series of alarming cost-cutting measures, with more than one third of DC's editorial positions eliminated by 2020. Morrison left in early 2019, and in June a *MAD* Facebook group leaked that the magazine would stop soliciting new material, fulfilling subscriptions by producing issues featuring primarily reprints (Jaffee, Aragonés, and, surprisingly, Sampson would provide a few pages of new material). In July, traditional and social media picked up the story and ran obituaries for the magazine that, while premature, were not greatly exaggerated. By the end of 2020 *MAD*'s bare-bones editorial team featured only Suzy Hutchinson, ostensibly the art director but now heroically handling almost everything, and Bern Mendoza, the assistant art editor responsible for laying out the issues. According to the last

ARTS & CULTURE

continued from 15

published circulation statement, the Fall 2020 issue sold 82,881 copies.

“They’re a reprint machine now,” explains Judith Yaross Lee, who with John Bird edited *Seeing MAD*, a massive collection of scholarly *MAD*-themed essays. “Someone has decided there’s a better return on their investment to recycle old wine in new bottles.” The reprint issues have featured themes, and unfortunately some of the themes have been farewells. In the case of Aragonés, whose recent “*MAD* Look At . . .” features demonstrate he is still a vital cartoonist, this is due to budget cuts (though not promoted as his last issue, Aragonés drew himself dragging his possessions out of *MAD*’s office with a sad, stunned expression). In the case of Jaffee it was a legitimate retirement, as the still mentally sharp humorist, as should be expected, had 99-year-old problems.

“Long ago, probably when Johnny was an infant, we had a conversation about if Al ever gives up the Fold-In, who would take it,” Viviano recalls. “I tended to be of the opinion that Al created it, had done every single one for over 50 years, when he retires it should be folded, but that’s not the *MAD* way. When Antonio Prohías retired they didn’t retire *Spy vs. Spy*. But to put it into Johnny’s hands . . . I don’t know that there’s anybody who would be more capable.”

Sampson officially took over in the October 2020 issue. He had previously done a social media Fold-In for Jaffee’s birthday, and an unofficial one earlier that year (featuring a tiny Al-endorsement). Taking over his mentor’s feature was not only a zine come true, it reflected Sampson’s unique place in the Usual Gang of Idiots. Although he only published three comics in the New York run of *MAD*, many consider that meaningful. “He was one of these few guys who actually made the transition from New York to Burbank,” recalls Doug Gilford, who runs the *Mad Cover Site*. “That’s important to me because there’s such a separation between the two editorial styles, and he bridged those quite well.” It also seems that alter kockers like Al and Sam (who co-nominated Sampson for the National Cartoonists Society) saw him as an old soul, a stand-up guy with a portfolio of solid, non-digital work—plus, his garage rock-style thick glasses and vintage coif make him look like a 1950s *MAD* artist.

As this goes to press, Sampson was working on his own deadline for the new Fold-In. The first step is develop-

ing ideas, which he submits with thumbnail sketches to his editor. “What I love about working with Johnny,” Hutchinson says, “is that he is a great comic writer as well. The *MAD* editors would usually only need to give him the theme of the issue or a topic we’d like to cover, and he runs with it. This was really like the editorial process when we worked with Mr. Jaffee.” The theme of the next issue is “*MAD* Predicts the Future,” and in a glimmer of optimism, Sampson received guidance to lean away from predicting *MAD*’s doom. After approval he folds a piece of paper to draw the final image, then unfolds to work backward on the full picture. He revises the design using a light table, then makes a color mock-up in Photoshop. The linework is printed out on 11” x 17” sheets, then transferred to a 17” x 17” artboard using carbon paper. He then executes the painting in gouache.

This will be Sampson’s fifth official Fold-In, and each has been a triumph, impressing even the most important critic: “His Fold-Ins are very attractive,” Jaffee commented via e-mail. “The imagery is very good. Any cartoon or illustration is going to reflect the personality of the cartoonist. Sampson has the opportunity to put his imprimatur on the Fold-In.” But despite the recognition from his peers, he receives little feedback. *MAD* has dropped their letters page and online presence, and because the Fold-In is only magical when actually folded, when Sampson posts on social media it earns light response. He is grateful to have steady work during a pandemic, and is well aware of the gig’s historical magnitude. But his pride is tempered by reality.

“You know, it feels real, but it also feels like I just got in at the tail end of it, again,” Sampson says. “When I was at the ad agencies it was like *Mad Men*, all these people running around, making commercials, it was like, go, go, go, and then it’s just like, gone. Even doing stuff with the *Reader* was like, this is great, I’m doing cover illustrations. Then things change and it’s gone. I get these achievements. Then it’s just these massive disappointments. This has been no different.”

“I think he would have been one of those members of the Usual Gang of Idiots who became part of the *MAD* DNA,” veteran *MAD* caricaturist Tom Richmond muses. “Johnny was headed that way when the wheels fell off, he really got shortchanged.”

With *MAD* no longer soliciting non-Sampson material, its idle creatives got, well, creative. Richmond and *MAD* writer Desmond Devlin successfully crowdfunded *Claptrap*, a



Fold-In art with final line art used for transferring to illustration board, *MAD* Vol. 2 #16 © KRISTAN LIEB

hardcover collection of parodies of films *MAD* missed since their new material moratorium (“Star Worse - Plagiarizing Skywalker”). Cartoonist Andrew Goldfarb, who joined the idiot gang months before the well went dry, launched a *MAD*-style zine *Freaky*, publishing a half dozen former *MAD* contributors so far (Sampson’s in an upcoming issue). *Freaky* features a Fold-In inspired See-Thru. Michael Gerber, a humor magazine veteran who publishes *MAD* talent in his *American Bystander*, is developing a *MAD*-inspired magazine with Bill Morrison that will feature an army of ex-idiot, and could launch as early as fall 2021.

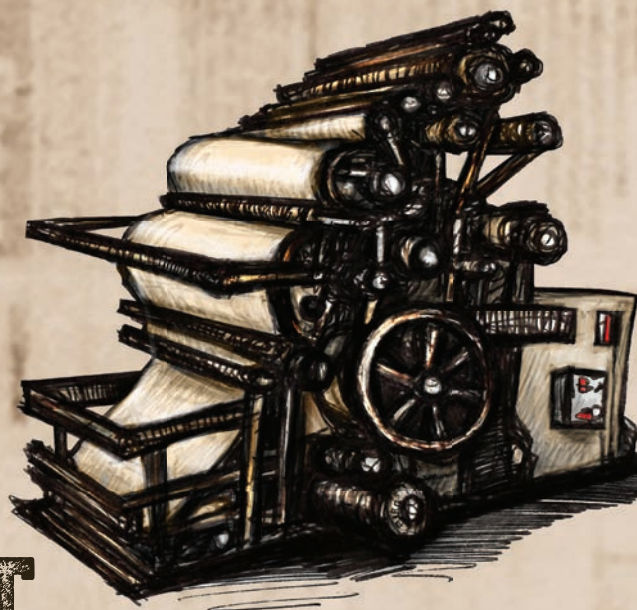
Upon learning of *MAD*’s situation in 2019 Gerber assembled investors and contacted AT&T about buying *MAD*, but the offer was not entertained. If *MAD* is not for sale, there are several possible futures. AT&T could maintain ownership while letting another publisher create issues. AT&T could reinvest. They could maintain the current reprints plus Johnny model, and limp along. Or worse. While Hutchinson was not authorized to give answers about *MAD*’s future, the fact is no one really knows. One prominent troll has revealed DC will end all print this summer, but he is the comics equivalent of QAnon. A more reality-based take is that the people involved in the comics industry are in a similar boat as those in hospitality, theaters, and music these days. They hope they have jobs next week, but who knows?

The current issue of *MAD* is the “Espionage Edition,” with a new cover by Peter Kuper, the political cartoonist who took over *Spy vs. Spy* in 1997. It also contains his three-page story that seems like a swan song for the spies, an epic that spans from pre-mammalian evolution to postnuclear holocaust. Other than those four pages the only new artwork is Sampson’s very funny Fold-In, comparing the spies to (spoiler alert) AI virtual assistant technology. (“His current Fold-In,” Jaffee wrote, “is beautifully rendered.”) Solicitations for the spring issue list no new artwork other than Sampson’s. There are a few optimistic signs. Hutchinson was excited to acquire new marginals (the tiny comics that appear in the margins) from Aragonés, tempering the pathos of his exit illustration, and Kuper’s final panel, while literally apocalyptic, left a sliver of hope for future entries. But if *MAD* does not reverse course, and if Sergio’s batch of pantomime magic is finite, Johnny Sampson may be the final *MAD* artist, the last idiot standing.

And if that, sadly, does turn out to be the case, perhaps he’s the best idiot for the job. “A lot of times when a magazine is in its final days, you can really see how the quality has gone down,” waxes Bill Morrison. “One thing you can definitely say for *MAD* is that, with Johnny’s work in it, the quality remained super high until the end.” 📺

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VISUAL ARTS

‘The Long Dream’ and a labor nightmare

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago’s latest exhibit preaches equity, but behind the scenes artists and former museum employees are demanding real change.

By **KERRY CARDOZA**

“When we shut down in March 2020, we pivoted our programming immediately,” MCA director Madeleine Grynsztejn wrote in a recent column for *Art in America*. The most important new programming was “The Long Dream,” a wide-ranging exhibition featuring more than 70 local artists, which was meant to reflect the museum’s “commitment to equity.” “When most institutions were furloughing their front-facing employees, we went in the opposite direction,” she wrote, going on to list the ways the museum has supported staff since

the pandemic began, such as allowing visitor services staff to work from home and offering anti-racism workshops.

The op-ed, which appeared in the magazine’s December 2020 issue, was published online on January 22. The day prior, the MCA laid off 41 employees. To many people in the Chicago art community, particularly those involved in “The Long Dream,” the back-to-back news of Grynsztejn’s self-laudatory column and the devastating blow to her employees was unconscionable. Attempts to reach Grynsztejn directly for comment were

unsuccessful, though the MCA did provide the *Reader* with a statement commenting on the “difficult decision” to reduce staff and reiterating its commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility initiatives.

Artists Hương Ngo and H'àng-Ân Truong, who had work installed in the museum’s “Alien vs. Citizen” exhibition, cancelled a January 23 performance out of solidarity with MCA employees. “It felt really unethical to move forward with the performance,” Truong says.

This wasn’t the first incident that prompted Ngo and Truong to speak out about the MCA.

MCA workers began publicly agitating for changes in June, when the museum’s Teen Creative Agency called on Grynsztejn to cut ties with the Chicago Police Department and “to acknowledge the systematic abuse of power and overt brutality exhibited by the police.” That same month, a coalition of MCA workers across departments formed MCAccountable in order to make demands for accountability and for eradicating racial injustice. Those demands were laid out in an open letter to Grynsztejn published on July 16. The most urgent demands concerned the muse-


 COURTESY MCA CHICAGO

um's reopening, which was scheduled for July 24. The human resources department had sent a survey out to gauge employees' comfortability in returning to work. Despite 50 percent saying they felt uncomfortable and another 13 percent saying they felt uncertain, leadership moved ahead with reopening. MCAccountable called the reopening "dangerous, irresponsible, ableist, and racist," as COVID-19 cases were still on the rise, particularly in Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities. As the letter pointed out, the front-facing positions in the museum—employees in visitor experience, retail experience, facilities, housekeeping, security, and the museum's restaurant, Marisol—were held predominantly by BIPOC workers. MCAccountable demanded the museum remain closed until front-facing workers felt safe returning, and that part-time workers be guaranteed \$300 per week of remote work. More specific demands were stipulated on a yearlong timetable, including securing a minimum wage for interns and Teen Creative Agency members and institution-wide pay transparency.

Ngo didn't learn about the letter until she was at the "Alien vs. Citizen" opening on July 17. Ngo and Truong sent Grynsztejn their own private letter that week expressing support for MCAccountable's demands. "We ask that you recognize the direct connection between the demands of institutional reckonings with white supremacy and the demands of workers for safety and pay equity in the face of the coronavirus," they wrote. Grynsztejn thanked the artists for their letter, and then directed them to curatorial staff with any further concerns. Ultimately the artists did not reach out, noting that the curator was more or less powerless to change anything.

"There's kind of this stark discrepancy between what is happening on the surface, in the programming rosters that we're seeing, and what is happening behind the scenes and how staff are feeling as part of this institution," Ngo says.

Around the same time MCAccountable

began organizing, the museum started to organize "The Long Dream." Many artists who were invited to participate in the exhibition over the summer were immediately concerned with what that participation would mean in light of the MCA's action, or inaction, around employee concerns. Neither Grynsztejn nor anyone else in leadership has ever directly responded to MCAccountable's letter.

On August 12 the museum announced that the 28 part-time visitor experience associate positions would be eliminated, and eight full-time positions would be created instead, which current employees would have to apply for. As MCAccountable noted in a second public letter, released August 21, this position restructuring was not a part of their demands. The layoffs, MCAccountable wrote, impacted workers "in a majority-BIPOC department" and "seem to functionally retaliate against, divide, and disrupt the organizing of junior-level staff toward real equity and racial justice."

Maria Gaspar and Aram Han Sifuentes, two artists invited to exhibit in "The Long Dream," expressed their concerns to the museum, which led to a meeting with Naomi Beckwith, the show's lead curator, who has since announced she will be leaving the museum in June. The artists, both of whom make work that explores societal inequities, told Beckwith that if they were to participate in the show, then Grynsztejn needed to meet with MCAccountable. The artists got an e-mail from Beckwith the very next day, relaying that Grynsztejn refused their idea, Sifuentes says, because she didn't "want to prioritize any meeting with any group."

As a result, the artists, two monumental local talents (Gaspar is a 2021 USA Fellow, Sifuentes is an artist-in-residence at Loyola University), withdrew. "For me what was so unsettling about it is like, these are a lot of young, BIPOC employees making very legitimate and really strong points in terms of the inequities that are in the museum itself, and asking for action and accountability," Sifuentes says. "The demand is ultimately just for a meeting with Madeleine, the director. That she's refusing to meet with her staff just is crazy to me."

Before "The Long Dream" opened on November 7, other artists, including Monica Trinidad of For the People Artists Collective, a group of artists of color that work to uplift liberation movements, and Folayemi Wilson, also withdrew. Meanwhile participating artists were meeting behind the scenes, trying to figure out the best way to support MCAccount-

able and other museum employees. To these artists, it seemed the MCA caught wind of their organizing and began to make their own plans to try and preempt any bad publicity. A few weeks before the exhibition was to open, chief curator Michael Darling called almost all of the more than 70 artists in the show, to talk through any concerns they might have. Darling left the museum in February 2021.

"That just seemed to be a pretty weird gesture, to make time for that but not to talk with people that actually work at the MCA," "The Long Dream" artist Kirsten Leenaars says. "I think that's a very particular strategy, kind of siloing people versus having a more open public shared dialogue."

The week of the opening, "The Long Dream" artists sent an open letter to Grynsztejn, museum curators, and the museum's board members, expressing their support of MCAccountable and their unmet demands. "It is an honor to present our work in such a large sweeping group exhibition that navigates the complex implications of the current global pandemic, racial justice uprising, and growing inequality," the artists write. "However we find ourselves conflicted given the issues of racism, equity, and transparency within the MCA raised by staff members and the Teen Creative Agency through a series of public letters, and the leadership's troubling response (or lack thereof)." The letter, which was signed by a majority of artists in the exhibition, and dozens of others, asked Grynsztejn to respond to MCAccountable and to meet with "The Long Dream" artists collectively.

Grynsztejn didn't respond to MCAccountable until the day before we went to press, following meetings between some of "The Long Dream" artists and MCA curators. Though two days before the exhibition's opening, Grynsztejn sent an e-mail to the exhibiting artists providing an update on the MCA's equity goals. (An almost verbatim version was also posted on the MCA website). "I believe the artists in 'The Long Dream' and the MCA share a mutual goal for our museum: that of an equitable and caring institution in a more equitable and caring Chicago," she wrote. "Our artists should hold us to that standard, and I am grateful to every artist that demands that the MCA be a living example of equity." The letter provided an addendum of the museum's action steps, including: the expansion of sick time for part-time employees, the formation of an anti-racism task force and a trustee task force focused on diversity, increased communication efforts with staff, internal anti-racist

trainings, adherence to CDC guidelines, and the layoff of part-time visitor experience staff, which was phrased as the creation of full-time positions "to provide greater benefits and support to frontline staff."

Jina Valentine, an artist in "The Long Dream," noted the lack of specificity in museum communications. "There's very little transparency, if any transparency, about what the administration's actually doing to address that set of demands," she says. "What are you doing actually? What are the concrete steps you have taken to address these concerns?"

Marya Spont-Lemus, a member of MCAccountable who was let go from her part-time position in the Learning Department in the January layoffs, said that museum leadership would frequently send e-mails that skirted MCAccountable's demands but never confronted them directly. "Museum leadership is really only talking about racism in the shallowest of terms," she says.

Due to rising COVID-19 infections, the museum closed less than two weeks after "The Long Dream" opened, and remained closed into the new year. Once the layoffs were announced in January, MCAccountable set up an emergency GoFundMe, with a fundraising goal of \$30,000. The money, organizers wrote, was meant in part to make it easier for laid-off workers to avoid signing "separation agreements," which included a mutual non-disparagement clause, in order to receive severance pay. According to former staff, part-time workers were offered anywhere from the low-\$100s to around \$800.

The layoffs were announced to staff in a surprise Zoom call. One former staff member said that when the separation agreement was introduced, staff were advised to have a lawyer review it, a tone-deaf, if pro forma, suggestion, because for many staffers, the cost of a lawyer would likely cost more than the severance pay. And while the museum says there has been no retaliation against any staff members, according to one former staffer, of the 19 employees who publicly signed their name to the July letter, only one remains employed at the museum.

This round of layoffs felt particularly egregious to both staff and artists, and not only because it came right before Grynsztejn's congratulatory column. In many prior instances, the director had championed the museum's avoidance of layoffs. In a July article in the *Tribune*, Grynsztejn said that "part of striving for racial equity was not to let people go."

Others questioned the museum's framing of the layoffs as a budget issue, as reported by

ARTS & CULTURE

continued from 19

ArtNews. In 2020, the museum received a \$2 million loan through the government's Pay-check Protection Program, and in September, the museum received a \$2.5 million award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the largest foundation grant in its history, meant in part to help accelerate the museum's commitments to the values of "inclusion, diversity, equity, and access." In her July conversation with the *Tribune*, Grynsztein mentioned the budget for the year had been cut by \$8 million. In a statement to the *Reader*, the museum said senior leadership has taken pay cuts during "this tough time," though to what extent is unclear. According to the museum's 2018 tax returns, Grynsztein's total compensation was \$690,376, her base pay \$625,908.

The most recent layoffs led "The Long Dream" artists to regroup and discuss how best to respond. The exhibition's artists were chosen because their work "offers us ways to imagine a more equitable and interconnected world," according to the museum website. The disconnect between the museum's program-

ming and public-facing communications and its internal actions was not lost on them.

"You're instrumentalizing this exhibition and you're instrumentalizing the artists that are part of it to kind of say, 'Look we are doing all this great stuff around social justice,'" Leenaars says. "I didn't choose to withdraw immediately before the exhibition because I thought, well I hope that we can have a dialogue. But now I'm like, clearly you're not interested in this dialogue. And you're not sincere in your efforts."

The MCAccountable organizers have put together options for all the artists in the exhibition to choose from. They can withdraw en masse from the show, which has been extended to May 2, they can sign on in support of the artists who are withdrawing, or they can abstain from action. The organizing artists are well aware that choosing not to participate in the exhibition, or choosing to withdraw, are privileges that not everyone can afford, both financially and professionally. "It's not an easy decision for anybody to engage this way," says artist Max Guy, noting that the \$1,500 pay-

ment to participate was more than last year's stimulus check.

The artists are at work on a new open letter, announcing their plans to withdraw and voicing their frustrations with the uncomfortable position the MCA has put them in. As of press time, 30 artists had signed on to withdraw. "If you want to instrumentalize this particular type of artist, and these local artists, it also comes at a cost," Valentine says. "We're going to hold you to account. You also have to be a place that we respect, that we want to show."

A statement provided by the MCA read in part, "We consistently feature the work of female, BIPOC, and LGBTQ artists and are deeply committed to supporting the arts community in which we live and serve, and encourage voices that can lead to social change." While the museum says it considers MCA employees and exhibiting artists part of that community, it is clear many do not feel supported by the museum. Current and former staff in MCAccountable, many of whom are artists themselves, have outlined the ways the museum fails to support them in their letters, which

hundreds of others have added their signatures to. Dozens of other artists, who are now showing or have shown at the museum, have also spoken out about the ways the museum is in fact committing harm to its community.

As Hương Ngo noted, the Chicago art scene is tight, artists function as workers, educators, they have many ties to one another. "It's just really shocking and disheartening for the museum to believe that something like this, or these repeated actions, can't have some effect on their community," she says. "And maybe they don't consider us their community, you know, which is a really sad thought."

Marcela Torres, a former staff member in the Learning Department who was laid off in January, hopes this moment can serve to galvanize the Chicago art community to demand change. "Are we gonna continue to support a space that we know is toxic? That has continued to say no to structural change?" she asks. "Because this is our community space. This is our contemporary art museum." 

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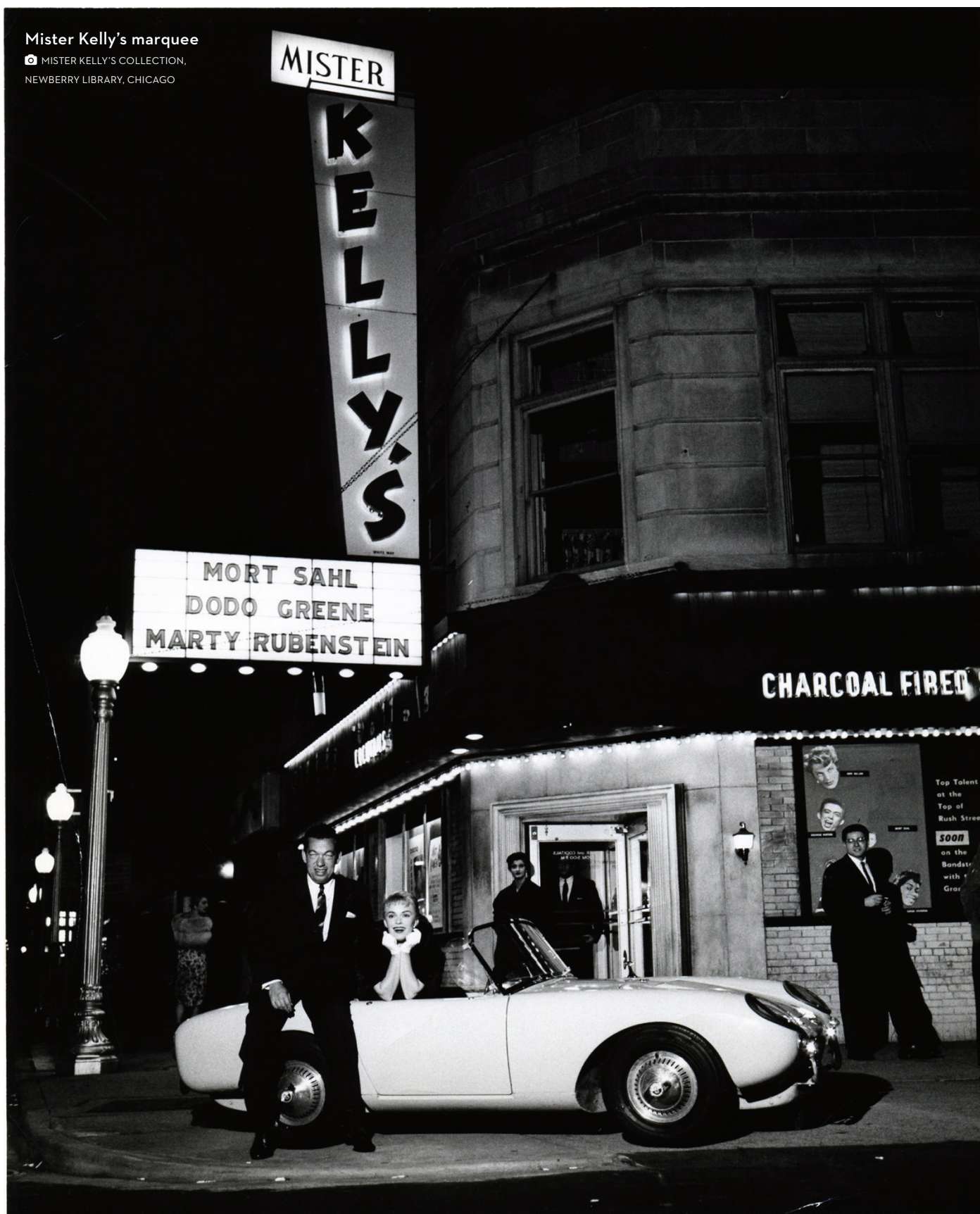
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NIGHTLIFE HISTORY

Mister Kelly's comes back to life

The Newberry Library and an upcoming doc preserve the legacy of the legendary nightclub.

By **KERRY REID**

Back when nightclubs were smoke-filled rooms, where people dressed up for a night on the town, and before the 1980s explosion of comedy rooms like Zanies (and various other Ha-Ha Huts, Laugh Lodges, and Chuckle Chambers featuring generic brick walls and a lone mike onstage), there was Mister Kelly's.

The legendary Chicago Rush Street establishment, owned and operated by brothers and Hyde Park natives Oscar and George Marienthal, ran for 22 years (1953-1975), during which time it endured two fires and the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Richard Pryor was booked there during the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination, which according to some accounts started him on the path to more controversial and "blue" comedy that didn't sit right with George Marienthal; at any rate, he never worked at Kelly's again.

The brothers also ran London House, a jazz supper club in the London Guarantee building at Wacker and North Michigan, which existed from 1946-75 (first known as a diner, the Fort Dearborn Grill), and the Happy Medium, a cabaret-performance space (and later a disco) that was at Rush and Delaware from 1960 until the late 70s.

Mister Kelly's in particular showcased entertainers who changed the course of comedy and music: Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Bob Newhart, Shelley Berman, Joan Rivers, Dick Gregory, Lily Tomlin, the Smothers Brothers, Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Muddy Waters, and "Mama" Cass Elliott, among many others, filled the bill over the years.

Now the history of the club lives on, just around the corner from its old Rush Street location (currently occupied by Gibsons Steakhouse). The Newberry Library recently

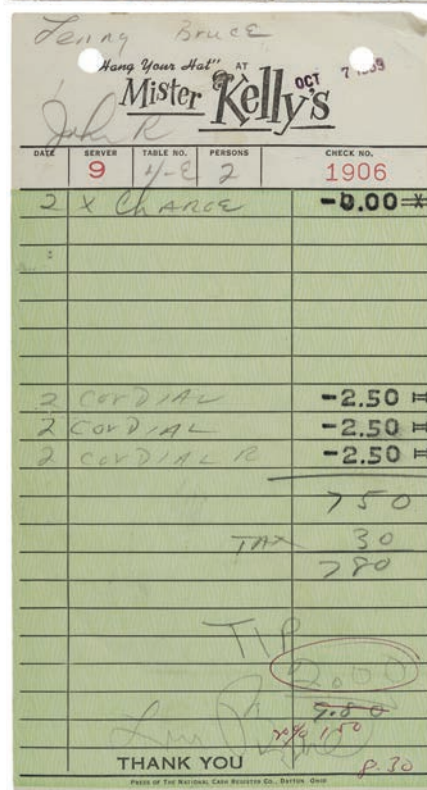
acquired the club's archives—which include everything from ephemera like Bruce's bar tab to posters, photographs, and original recordings—from David Marienthal, George's son. And a new documentary, *Live at Mister Kelly's*, produced by Marienthal with director-screenwriter Ted Bogosian, is set to air on WTTW on May 27.

Oscar Marienthal died at 50 in 1963—right after booking the 20-year-old Streisand for the club. George Marienthal died in 1972, when his son was 21; the clubs had been sold in 1969 and George continued working for the new owners until his death. David, a child of the 60s, didn't get invested in preserving the history of the family business until later in life, though he did occasionally run lights and sound for Mister Kelly's. Marienthal's eclectic career includes time as an architect in Santa Fe; running the celebrated Blue Mesa restaurant in Lincoln Park with brother Phil Marienthal for 17 years (it closed in 2000); and teaching art in California. He moved back to Chicago in 2010.

"I joined all the rest of the nation and was rebelling against authority and fame and money and became a hippie, which my father really couldn't understand, coming out of the Depression," says Marienthal of his early years. But with his mother's death in 2012, he realized that the chances to connect with those who made Mister Kelly's a vital part of Chicago cultural history were slipping away.

"I had this plan where I really wanted to create this archive of material that would be available for historians, artists, and playwrights to really memorialize this era. Because I did have a real sense that if I didn't do something, it was going to be lost." As he dove into the process of collecting material and stories, Marienthal realized that a documentary might be a good way to go.

Finding the material wasn't easy; in addition to the fires in 1957 and 1966, subsequent owners had lost archives they'd taken over from the Marienthals in the sale. David Marienthal started putting out calls on social media to find people with connections to Mister Kelly's, and also put together a website. He then began reaching out to do interviews with stars who had appeared at Mister Kelly's. "You know, these celebrities, Bob Newhart, and Lily [Tomlin] started calling me back, willing to do interviews because they had so much respect for my father and uncle, and that's when I really started thinking about the documentary film." A few years into the research, in 2016, he connected with Adam Carston, a grad student



Cover of Della Reese's live recording; Lenny Bruce's bar tab. MISTER KELLY'S COLLECTION, NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO

from Loyola University specializing in American cultural history.

"I have to tell you that as someone who prides themselves on being a fan and an admirer of old comedy and pop culture, and, you know, certainly Chicago history, I didn't really know about the club until right before I joined the project," says Carston. He figured that was a sign that it was important to start saving the history. But where to start?

"It seemed pretty insurmountable early on," admits Carston. "It seemed like, 'Oh my

God, is anything left to this club? Am I crazy? How can, you know, how can this have all disappeared?' Because it all broke up and went to a million places. And so it was our job to piece as much together as we could." Carston also says, "The whole project was also fighting against the actuary tables of death. You know, everybody [associated with the club] is at the youngest in their early to mid-70s." In addition to Newhart and Tomlin, Carston and Marienthal interviewed Dick Gregory before he died in 2017. But Shelley Berman, who also died in 2017, had developed Alzheimer's years earlier and couldn't contribute his stories.

Sometimes they dug up treasure from seemingly unlikely sources. Carston recalls a sweaty bike journey to the near north suburbs to meet with a couple of former waitresses from Mister Kelly's. "I get there and I'm thinking, 'Man, this is going to be a bust. Why did I come all the way here?' I walk in and Dave is in there and he's just already smiling." The former employees had an entire room filled with posters from the club.

Newberry's involvement in taking over the material collected by Marienthal came about through a common connection between Carston and the research institute. Elliott Gorn is the Joseph A. Gagliano Chair in American Urban History and a former professor of Carston's at Loyola. He's also a scholar-in-residence at the Newberry and suggested to the staff that the Mister Kelly's collection would make a good fit.

Gorn notes two things that made Kelly's such a popular attraction, aside from the top-notch talent. "One, it was not terribly expensive." (The club featured "bleacher" seating at the back where, as Marienthal puts it, "You could go and see this great talent for \$2 and the price of a drink.")

Gorn adds, "It was remarkably intimate. You would see these really budding stars in a very, very close space. It was really remarkable that way." (The club only had about 200 seats.)

Says Alison Hinderliter, Lloyd Lewis Curator of Modern Manuscripts and Selector for Modern Music at the Newberry, who is in charge of the archive, "Everyone was on board about the Mister Kelly's collection. Because it fits in with so many of our other collecting strengths. The first is Chicago history—and this is very local history. You can't get much more local than two blocks away.

"We collect a lot in the performing arts. Comedy we don't have a lot of, but music we definitely do," says Hinderliter. "David was telling me more about Mister Kelly's as a really

unusual venue in Chicago that, during the 50s and 60s, welcomed interracial acts and interracial audiences, and the staff was mixed." Carston relates an anecdote about the National Organization for Women (NOW) recruiting Tomlin to boycott performing at Mister Kelly's if they enforced an archaic law that prohibited women from sitting alone at bars. (The reason was apparently the sexist assumption that any woman who would do that must be a sex worker; according to Carston, the club decided to stop enforcing the law, though whether it was Tomlin's threat or just the overall changing tenor of the times remains an open question.)

Right now, the materials are still being cataloged and digitized (including several rare albums by musical artists recorded live at either Mister Kelly's or London House), but the Newberry plans to have the collection available to researchers by late spring, with a public exhibit planned in the spring of 2024.

Mister Kelly's ultimately couldn't survive the changing aesthetics of the 1970s with the explosion of disco and the rise of late-night television, which became the grail for stand-up comedians. (The aforementioned comedy clubs that served as feeders for the late-night gigs were also cheaper to operate than the swankier dinner clubs like Mister Kelly's.)

Carston says, "You could point to the rise of the Internet age. People live in kind of their own curated bubbles now, instead of letting someone curate for you. And I think why the Marienthal brothers were so important and such tastemakers is they really chose. They helped people be seen, whether it's a comedian or musician or a woman or a person of color. You just go down the list and they really helped make a major and important stage for a lot of talented people who really needed that stage or who really thrived because they were on that stage."

David Marienthal is happy that the history of the family business will be safe and sound at the Newberry after being scattered for so many years. It also seems as if the process of collecting the interviews and material for the documentary helped him reconnect with the father he lost at a young age.

"My father did have a lot of love for Chicago and he did acknowledge how much the community gave back to him and created his success," says Marienthal. Now the successes that the Marienthal brothers helped create will live on as a permanent part of Chicago history, in the Newberry archives and on film. **FI**

@kerryreid



Caprice Williams OLIVIA OBINEME

SMALL SCREEN

For Caprice Williams, the *Journey* is just beginning

The filmmaker overcame many obstacles to achieve her dream, and she's not slowing down any time soon.

By **BRIANNA WELLEN**

Burning sage. Healing sessions. Yoga classes. Filmmaker Caprice Williams admits that when she was a kid, she would have assumed that anyone who did these things was a total weirdo. Yet they're practices that adult Caprice now preaches, ones that feature prominently in her new webseries *Journey*. In episode one, Magnolia (played by Williams) threatens to sage every part of her friend Gia (Antoinette Drummer). In episode two, Magnolia learns about the intuitive powers of tea. And in episode three, Magnolia invites a spiritual guide to join a party with her friends.

While the moments are at times played for laughs in the series, what they represent is something that Williams takes very seriously.

"My people need to know that there are other ways, other outlets to healing, and spirituality is a big step," Williams says. "It was a part of us, it's been a part of us for a while."

For Williams, it was creating the semi-autobiographical series itself that was the next step in her personal healing. Each episode of *Journey* starts with Magnolia writing in her journal, musing over her friends' problems and reflecting on her past. From there scenes

teeter between her present-day healing practices with her friends and flashbacks to her tumultuous childhood, creating a show that is equal parts laugh-out-loud, fantastical comedy and heart-wrenching, emotional drama. Williams wrote, produced, directed, and stars in the series—not an easy task for a first-timer in nearly every capacity, and one that can be especially taxing when it involves sharing parts of your life that even your closest friends weren't aware of. And yet somehow Williams makes it seem like a breeze. Even when speaking about her obstacles, there's a lightness and confidence in her voice.

It's an attitude that likely helped her get to where she is today. Williams grew up on the south side of Chicago, and first discovered her love for storytelling as a junior in Mr. Freed's creative writing class at Hyde Park Academy High School. After graduating in 2012, she left home due to a troubled relationship with her family. She went on to experience homelessness, spending years at Harmony Village, a transitional housing facility for young people ages 18-24. While she was pregnant with her daughter, her daughter's father was shot and

paralyzed. Within the series itself it's insinuated that Williams went through even more hardships in her childhood. But she doesn't like to dwell on the details too long in conversation, and instead looks forward to what she can do next to keep pursuing her dreams to better her community and keep telling stories.

The flow of the series is a lot like the steps of getting to know Williams: On first meeting there's an immediate joyfulness that radiates, plenty of wit, charm, and warmth. As time goes on, that layer never quite goes away, but slightly fades to show the pain underneath, the past tragedies that led her to this point. Being able to find the balance between the two has been a priority for her in life and in her art.

"When you see something that's super traumatic, I want you to be able to laugh despite it," Williams says. "I want people to be able to smile, I want people to be able to see, it happened, things always happen to us, but if you can see your way out and you can see a light, you can find a reason to smile, then you just kind of sort of beat that problem, you made it through that problem."

Williams wrote the script over two weeks last April, filmed for a week in October, then premiered all seven five-to-ten-minute episodes on February 28 on the Rouz Productions YouTube page. Early in the process she brought on experienced local cinematographer Jakub Wasowski after connecting for another potential project years earlier. He was immediately on board, calling Williams's scripts one of the best he'd ever read—"impressive" is his favorite word to describe Williams—but he was still skeptical about the learning curve ahead.

"I said, 'Listen Caprice, this is going to be a lot of work and you cannot underestimate that it will be probably one of the hardest projects in your life,'" Wasowski says. "And she said, 'Yeah, I'm in. Just tell me everything.' She was ready to learn and jump in and that's what she did."

"He's Polish," Williams says of Wasowski, "and I think his accent just made everything super pleasant for me, even when he was telling me I'm doing something wrong. I was like a kid in a candy store. I was ready for that knowledge, I was ready for the critiques, for the criticisms for everything, for people to tell me, 'I think you need to do this a little better.'"

As if the ambitiously short timeline and lack of experience wasn't enough, COVID threw

another wrench in the works. Shoots became more complicated while following pandemic protocols like distancing, sanitizing, and taking the temperature of everyone on set before beginning a day of production, not to mention the lack of locations available for certain scenes—much of the series ended up being shot in Williams’s apartment.

In addition to her crew, along the way Williams had the support of her close friend Maya Neita, who did everything from stapling the initial scripts and organizing release documents to cooking food for table reads and stepping in as a performer. “She didn’t have an assistant for these things, all while being a mom and working and hiring a production team and making sure you have the cameras and providing locations,” Neita says. “When she needed to rehearse, she would come over here, and I would be whoever she needed me to be at that time.”

Neita and Williams first met in high school as acquaintances, but later reconnected and became close friends when they were pregnant around the same time—Williams’s

daughter is five months older than Neita’s. In one of their first meetings Williams told Neita she was writing a book, something that initially surprised Neita and immediately let her know this was a woman with aspirations. The moment Neita realized the two would be friends for life was when Williams started to let her guard down, a rare occasion. Once their children started growing up together, their connection became even stronger.

Williams makes a point of not pressuring her daughter into following in her footsteps or going down any specific path. Instead Williams is just slowly exposing her daughter to the projects she’s working on as a way to show her following your dream, whatever that may be, is possible.

“My daughter is super creative, she knows how to draw, like, she could be an artist,” Williams says. “She loves to dance, she loves to sing. She could be Beyoncé. She could be whatever she wants to be, all I know is I need to just support her and whatever decision she chooses to make.”

Though the series is finished, Williams is

really just getting started. She’s already started writing season two of *Journey*, packing in everything she learned the first time around and introducing stories from her time experiencing homelessness. Through CAN TV she is working on creating an interview show called *Unpack the Gifted*, on which she’ll interview local folks who don’t usually have a platform for their message. Her first guest will be Ralph Bennet, the disciplinarian during Williams’s time at Hyde Park Academy High School who also had plenty of run-ins with her classmates G Herbo and King Von. Williams is also working on putting together seminars called “Unblock the Creativity” that she’s hoping to bring to the young people at Harmony Village, her old shelter. And she’s looking for funding to place all these and future projects under one umbrella: Rouz Productions.

“She is not yet even close to showing people her potential and showing the world what she can do with her beautiful creative mind,” Neita says.

While Williams admits that her own hard work and perseverance has helped her get

this far, she still preaches that spirituality was the key ingredient. That includes not only her healing practices, but also an unwavering belief in a higher power, one that through the course of filming the series became infectious.

“I personally have somehow remained neutral in that area but in a lot of sort of 50-50 situations Caprice would always say, ‘God will do what’s right for us,’” Wasowski says. “I would just usually shrug, but I actually have seen that working.”

Going forward, Williams is ready for anything that stands in her way, and in some ways embraces those obstacles. Slowly but surely she’s sharing more of her own story, not to dwell on the past, but as the only way she knows to move forward and thrive.

“If the road isn’t blocked, then I can get past freely and probably never learn from any mistakes,” Williams says. “So there are times I want to give up but then I think about the problems and that God hasn’t brought me this far to leave me, and it gives me strength.” 

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In other words, almost all CBD products promising better sleep, mood, blood pressure, cognitive function and even pain relief, all get filtered by your liver before they can even attempt to fix the problem.

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49-year-old Katherine H. reports, “I can whizz through my four-bedroom bungalow with the vacuum cleaner. I have so much more energy.”

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The United States vs. Billie Holiday

NOW PLAYING

RR *Billie Eilish: The World's A Little Blurry*

Billie Eilish has had an unbelievable couple of years, to put it lightly. R.J. Cutler's mammoth of a documentary follows the ins and outs of the 18-year-old musician's meteoric rise that puts her feelings at the forefront. *The World's A Little Blurry* follows Eilish through the most pivotal years of her career—and her teenagehood—but she is able to speak for herself when she has so often been spoken over, spoken about, and over-specified. Cutler graciously weaves between Eilish's public and private lives and reveals just how blurred those lines become with fame—and how emotionally taxing that can be for a young teenager. *The World's A Little Blurry* is most captivating, though, when it peels back the curtain on her mental and physical health: flipping through personal pages of her diary, gritting her teeth through necessary physical therapy, feeling bombarded and used by people just trying to control her. But between the glitz of her sold-out tours and historic Grammy wins, the film is equally concerned with who she is outside of all that: a teenager. She records music in her bedroom with her brother, she fangirls over Justin Bieber, she gets her driver's license—she just also happens to be one of the biggest pop stars in the world. —**CODY CORRALL** 150 min. [Apple TV](#)

Crazy About Her

Crazy About Her, the latest installment in Netflix's romantic comedies, follows writer Adri (Álvaro Cervantes) and Carla (Susana Abaitua), who after a spontaneous night together, agree to never see one another again. But Adri can't stop thinking about Carla and how much fun he had, so he searches for her, eventually discovers she's staying at a mental health facility, and checks in as a patient to be closer to her, much to her detestation.

While there, Adri is also supposed to be writing a story that gives readers an inside look at what goes on in mental health facilities, but like the film, he often uses language that further alienates and stigmatizes people with mental illnesses. Even in its best attempts to offer a deeper exploration of mental illnesses or empathy towards those living with mental illnesses, *Crazy About Her* falls short of creating a new and productive dialogue on a topic that remains a taboo in many cultures. —**MARISSA DE LA CERDA** 102 min. [Netflix](#)

RR *Pixie*

Olivia Cooke is reason enough to watch *Pixie*. If you've yet to be mesmerized by her acting chops (see *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, *Katie Says Goodbye*, *Thoroughbreds*, *Sound of Metal*, or even *Bates Motel*), here's your chance. As the equal parts charming and cunning Pixie O'Brien, she carries the movie with deft skill. A high-energy heist film, *Pixie* takes viewers through Ireland as O'Brien teams up with Frank (Ben Hardy) and Harland (Daryl McCormack) to avenge her mother and escape her suffocatingly small town. While Frank and Ben's characters are clearly in over their head, they provide an exciting chemistry to the trio as they all try to scheme and swindle their way to safety and success. Unfortunately, there are threats around every corner, whether it's Catholic criminals (which include Alec Baldwin, ew) or family foes, leaving viewers wondering until the very end who will get theirs. —**BECCA JAMES** 93 min. [In wide release on VOD](#)

Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time

With Hungarian writer-director Lili Horvát's second feature, it's less a question of "Will they or won't they?" than "Are they or aren't they?" Márta (Natasa Stork, a scintillatingly enigmatic presence) is an accomplished

Hungarian neurosurgeon who's spent much of her career in the U.S. She meets another Hungarian doctor at a conference in New Jersey, where they arrange to meet up a month later on a bridge in Budapest. Márta makes the trip only to be stood up; when she tracks down the doctor at the hospital where he works, he claims not to know her. Likewise dismayed and intrigued, Márta moves back to Budapest, takes a job at a nearby hospital, and begins following him, meanwhile attending therapy to determine if perhaps she invented the circumstances of their alleged meeting; mirroring Márta's self-deception is that of a young medical student who's enamored with her, convinced that she returns the sentiment. Overall I appreciate the intent of this modern take on the gaslight noir, in which we not only experience the purported delusion from the woman's perspective, but also accompany her in a journey toward discovering the truth behind her fixation. One can't help but be pulled in by the narrative machinations—the ambiguity of the premise is duly evocative, played for genuine suspense—which makes the underwhelming revelation toward the end all the more frustrating. Like Márta's own obsession, it might be that whatever's good about this film exists only in your head. In Hungarian and English with subtitles. —**KATHLEEN SACHS** 95 min. [Music Box Direct](#)

RR *Un Film Dramatique*

"For real," begins one of the young subjects—or, more accurately, one of the young participants—in Paris-based artist-filmmaker Eric Baudelaire's convivial and poignant documentary . . . wait. "Is it a film or a documentary?" the student finishes, after heatedly debating the subject with his classmates. An offscreen voice (presumably Baudelaire's) playfully says he doesn't know. The boy throws up his hands. "I say it's science fiction," he exclaims, noting a recent excursion to St-Ouen, where the sound for their film died, "was left behind,"

according to the kids. This student, a Romanian immigrant living in a Parisian suburb, epitomizes the capriciousness of the project at hand. Over the course of four years, Baudelaire worked with and filmed the same group of middle schoolers at the newly established Dora Maar Junior High School; he also lent them a small camera they could use to document their lives outside school, the results as artless and perspicacious as children are wont to be. The subjects are largely non-white, and several are the children of immigrants—Saint-Denis, where they live, is a lower-middle-class suburb where crime is prevalent. Their extempore discussions on such issues as race, the refugee crisis, and even the sociopolitical configuration of their school system are whimsical yet grave. Baudelaire, however, is inclined toward concepts rather than themes, with the former here begetting the latter. Baudelaire and editor Claire Atherton intersperse inane sequences of activities such as the kids making short film projects unrelated to the larger endeavor and pasting up humorous flyers next to political advertisements; here, playfulness becomes an end in itself. In French and Romanian with subtitles. —**KATHLEEN SACHS** 114 min. [Through 3/25: Siskel Film Center From Your Sofa](#)

The United States vs. Billie Holiday

A necessary yet poorly edited film undercuts the power of both Billie Holiday's story and Andra Day's stellar performance. Day masterfully channels every aspect of the American jazz legend, from her haunting singing voice, to her glamorous and rough-around-the-edges swagger. Director Lee Daniels possesses reverence for Lady Day, dutifully capturing her sequins, her signature gardenia, and her habit of shooting up heroin. Yet he hops around the story, unable to surrender to the languid mood, killing the buzz. Opening with a three-way narrative, the script by otherwise brilliant playwright Suzan-Lori Parks (*Father Comes Home From the Wars* series) awkwardly has each character highlight Billie's insistence on singing her sobering lynching protest song "Strange Fruit" over and over again. Loyal Billie fans will forgive these missteps to hear the rarely told story of Harry Anslinger, head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (Garrett Hedlund) and his terrifying obsession, which led him to jail and destroyed the career and life of the world-famous star. The best moments of the movie highlight the warmly raucous, drug-fueled backstage carousing with Holiday's entourage of chosen family. Like *Judas and the Black Messiah*, the story heavily focuses on her ill-advised relationship with and betrayal by FBI informant Jimmy Fletcher, a steady performance by Trevante Rhodes (*Moonlight*). The second half of the film eases into a relaxed pace, delving into Holiday's heartbreaking upbringing and trauma, and a visually-arresting dream sequence that realizes the full beauty of Daniels's vision. Like Billie herself, the film is beautifully imperfect. —**SHERI FLANDERS** 130 min. [Hulu](#)

Azita Youssefi has been making music in Chicago for 30 years.  THOMAS COMERFORD

Azita has more to say and more ways to say it

For *Glen Echo*, her first album in more than eight years, she played and recorded every instrument herself.

By MARK GUARINO

The first time you see “If U Die,” the new video from Chicago singer-songwriter Azita Youssefi, it might take you a minute to realize that the colorful rock band you’re watching is actually four matted-together versions of a single person. It’s Youssefi in every role: the shaggy, smiling bassist, the bespectacled guitarist wearing a red realtor blazer, the blonde lead vocalist in blue eye shadow with a scarf at her neck, and the cool, denim-clad drummer hiding behind shades.

None of the characters reveals anything about Youssefi personally, except perhaps her expert sense of show. But the video is more than a visual joke; it’s a reflection of the multifaceted musicianship she’s developed in real life. On the new *Glen Echo*, her first album in more than eight years (released this Friday by Chicago label Drag City), she plays every instrument herself—and she learned the drums only a year before she recorded those parts. A full-band album that consists exclusively of synced-up tracks of Youssefi herself demon-

strates not just her dogged commitment to doing things her way but also her ability to pull it off.

“She decided she wanted to play everything, so therefore she just learned how to be a drummer, which is kind of amazing,” says Mark Greenberg, who mixed *Glen Echo* with Youssefi. She recorded the album at home, so no other engineer is credited. “That’s the same all the way through—her whole body of work is willed into being in a really strong way.”

It’s been 30 years since Youssefi formed her

first band, the Scissor Girls, with drummer and childhood friend Heather Melowic and guitarist Sue Anne Zollinger. Their noisy art-punk trio immediately attracted a following in the underground scene that had emerged in Wicker Park, then just beginning to gentrify. In 2003, after a few years playing in marginally less abrasive rock group Bride of No No, she launched her solo career with the Drag City album *Enantiodromia*. Her impressive body of work since then—which includes five more full-lengths, counting *Glen Echo*—has estab-

lished her as an artist comfortable moving among accessible pop tunes, introspective piano-driven singer-songwriter fare, and no-wave freak-outs without anything sounding like a genre exercise.

Thomas Comerford, the musician and filmmaker who produced the “If U Die” video, says he’s always been impressed by Youssefi’s “serious chops,” but to his ears, the “poetic sensibility” of her vocal phrasing and lyrics elevates her performances beyond virtuosity. “I’m compelled by how she combines these elements in the making of her music,” he says. “It’s a style that’s totally her own. She’s able to cast a spell when she performs.”

Youssefi doesn’t seem as impressed by the distinctiveness of her own style, though. She says that as she’s gotten older she’s become more invested in communicating through the songs themselves, rather than through what she in particular brings to them. That’s a dramatic departure from her earliest days onstage, when she maintained a disorienting, confrontational persona and often wore raccoon makeup or attention-grabbing costumes, such as a bubble-wrap two-piece or a stylized white burka.

“If you hear a Nina Simone song, you’re paying attention to the performance,” Youssefi says. “For me, I want a song to be a thing where a person can picture themselves singing it. It’s not about watching me singing it—it’s the idea of a song that’s powerful enough that another person feels like it’s about them.”

Youssefi was born in the U.S., but her family soon moved to the Iranian capital of Tehran, where they lived till she was eight. Her parents, both native Iranians, were medical students, and they’d begun their residencies in stateside hospitals before the move. Once the family settled in Iran, Youssefi attended the Tehran American School, which primarily served children of American diplomats and businesspeople. Because she looked Iranian and was more comfortable speaking Farsi than English, she was frequently targeted by her white peers—even though she was as American as they were. “Kids made fun of me because my English wasn’t great,” she says. It was her first encounter with stereotypical “ugly Americans.”

The Iranian revolution, which replaced the country’s monarchy with an Islamic theocracy led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had been bubbling up in pockets of unrest for more than a year by the time it forced her family to flee in early 1979. Months earlier, Youssefi’s

school had been bombed during Christmas break, and she can still remember seeing a masked man from the window of her house who was standing across the street with a machine gun.

Today, the experience makes Youssefi sad for her parents’ home country as well as for her own. She knows firsthand how a cultural movement can descend into chaos and violence. Even before last year’s armed protests on the steps of the Michigan capitol building and January’s deadly riot on Capitol Hill, she was familiar with such images of insurrection.

“There was an economic revolution, and that was co-opted by hard-core, right-wing, theocratic revolutionaries. It’s like if Bernie Sanders took over and everyone making it happen was leftist, but then the next day the Tea Party takes over—that’s sort of what happened,” Youssefi explains. “That’s why I’m not a very revolutionary-minded person. Because what happens the next day? Who has the guns?”

The family quickly uprooted their lives and returned to the U.S., where Youssefi enrolled as a third-grader in an all-girls school near Washington, D.C. Her parents largely stayed silent about what was happening back home, and it never became a topic of conversation. Neither did conditions in Iran before the revolution. “When you look at pictures of Tehran at the time, it’s beautiful and progressive, but also unequal,” Youssefi says. “I never talked to them about it.”

The Iran hostage crisis began in November 1979 and dominated the news for months. Iranians were disparaged in the media as terrorists, and Youssefi once again found herself ostracized at school. Her disinterest in strict adherence to traditional Iranian norms also caused frequent strife at home. “I was the cause of a lot of the family drama,” she says. Her parents had split up by the time she started high school, and her mother, Nancy, largely raised Youssefi and her younger sister after that. Thankfully she had her mother’s support—Nancy was a cosmopolitan Iranian woman who followed fashion and pursued a full-time career as an obstetrician and gynecologist, and she served as an important role model. “She was never having the patriarchal shit,” Youssefi says.

By her freshman year, Youssefi had started going to punk shows around D.C., especially at the 9:30 Club. At around the same time, she quit the piano lessons she’d started taking in third grade. A life in music seemed like an improbability: her parents weren’t active

listeners and didn’t own records, and as far as Youssefi knew, nobody else in her extended family was musical either. She learned about the Beatles from her Polish nanny, who showed up with two greatest-hits albums on eight-track. “That was something I absorbed every ounce of,” Youssefi remembers.

In 1989, Youssefi moved to Chicago to study painting at the School of the Art Institute. She found out quickly that she wasn’t motivated to pursue an art career. She switched her focus to sound and drawing, and when she started the Scissor Girls, that helped too. Youssefi says she has no memory of how she learned to play bass guitar. “What happened? It blows my mind,” she says. “Someone must have shown me something, because there’s no way I figured it out on my own.” She’s similarly hazy about the band’s origins, though she remembers they practiced in the basement of a bathhouse on Division Street.

This past December, California reissue label Jabs reissued the Scissor Girls’ 1992 demo on vinyl. Youssefi says she has trouble listening to the band today because it sounds so “crude and raw,” like someone just trying to figure things out. But she’s still able to enjoy a bit of nostalgia for Wicker Park in the 1990s, which was dominated by storefront theaters, cafes, and little bars—not chain boutiques, luxury SUVs, and tourists. “Everyone I knew lived several doors from each other, everyone’s flyers were up promoting shows . . . it was an amazing time,” she recalls.

The Scissor Girls split up in 1996, and in 1999 Youssefi became one-fourth of Bride of No No. She found that during her alone time, she was once again sitting at the piano. She entertained herself by relearning the Debussy and Bach compositions of her youth, and soon that evolved into figuring out a new process for writing songs on piano. Then came piano-and-vocal demos and solo performances of new songs around town. *Enantiodromia* was the first full-length from this project, which Youssefi called simply “Azita.”

The album’s lean and melodic piano arrangements place the focus squarely on her unforced, slightly theatrical vocals. The arrangements have a whiff of avant-jazz flavor, because her band includes cornetist Rob Mazurek and two members of Tortoise, guitarist Jeff Parker and drummer John McEntire. The obvious comparison is to golden-age 1970s singer-songwriters such as Laura Nyro or Harry Nilsson. Ryan Murphy, head of sales for Drag City and an early advocate for Youssefi, says he was struck by what a stark departure

Enantiodromia was for her at the time. For the first time, she’d released something that had the potential to reach a wide audience—but he says that’s something Youssefi herself often resists.

“That’s been a constant concern of ours from the very beginning,” Murphy explains. “*Enantiodromia* had tunes on it that felt very poppy, that could appeal far outside the realm of the Scissor Girls and Bride of No No. I hear a real original voice using some of the vernacular of classic pop songwriters. But because it’s Azita, she doesn’t see things that way. She can’t perceive herself in those realms.”

Streaming and other digital music platforms have made the job of marketing Youssefi much easier. Sites that provide some form of curation or employ internal navigation tools, including Spotify and Bandcamp, are designed to draw in adventuresome listeners open to discovery. Connecting an artist with an audience in this context is much easier for a label than trying to convince media gatekeepers in a top-down system to endorse something they may never have heard.

“With someone as uncompromising as Azita, you have to put music in front of people and play it and have them decide for themselves, because this is the kind of music people who decide for themselves will respond to,” Murphy says.

Glen Echo is primarily a guitar-pop album, with echoes of the Police and Built to Spill. But it’s also a deeply personal collection of songs, drawing on images from Youssefi’s past and the anxiety she feels living in the present. One of the catalyzing events was her mother’s death in early 2016, when Youssefi was deep in the songwriting. She spent some of that year packing up her childhood home near D.C. and, she says, “dealing with things with my own history.”

You can hear echoes of that time in album closer “Don’t,” the only solo piano song on *Glen Echo*. She seems to be addressing herself, insisting that she feel her own emotions: “As you are slipping away / Don’t shut down,” she sings. “Don’t fight it / Don’t make it go all quiet.”

Youssefi developed some songs by playing around with guitar riffs; others originated on piano, but she later transferred them to guitar. She recorded herself on her four-track as she worked, and over time, she started liking the results—she realized that her method was capturing small nuances and idiosyncratic moments that would be lost if she handed off



One of the many roles Youssefi plays in the video for *Glen Echo* track “If U Die” 📸 COURTESY THE ARTIST

continued from 29

the songs to a band to rerecord. “I could tell someone to make it smoother and tighter, but what’s cool about it is an angularity and a quirkiness,” she says. The obvious challenge was adding drums. She wasn’t a drummer, and she didn’t want to bring in another musician. That meant she had to learn.

Greenberg mixed Youssefi’s home recordings with her at the Loft, the recording and practice space that Wilco maintains in Albany Park (he’s the band’s studio manager). He says she made the right choice, based on what he heard on those tapes: performances with personality in every note. “It didn’t seem right to quote-unquote ‘fix these parts.’ Because it’s

so Azita,” he says. “I didn’t want to erase her from it. It could have been the same record in its presentation, but it would have been way less Azita and way more boring.”

Greenberg sees *Glen Echo* as a record that would lose its power if subjected to a perfectionist studio treatment. “The eccentricities are not extras that are sprinkled over everything; they are at the heart of everything,” he says. “I’m glad she knows that. But I’m also glad that she, in some ways, can’t hear it. She’s kind of like the spider making this beautiful web that we all can see, but to her, she’s the spider just making a web. I was constantly reminding myself to honor that.”

The music’s unexpected twists and odd ges-

tures keep it thrilling, even after multiple listens. Youssefi often extends words or phrases to make them flicker longer for maximum impact. The chugging rocker “Online Life” isn’t just about how social media is rewiring our brains, but also about how our complacency is letting it happen: “Everyone’s outraged, but on the plus side,” she sings, “No one is keeping score.”

The album’s raw, basement feel parallels its midnight anxiety. “Bruxism” introduces heavy guitar riffs and hand claps that create the feel of racing down the street—or racing around inside your own brain. “I’m OK at slow, can’t think too fast,” Youssefi sings. “White light comes, obliterates / Everything in its path.”

The cover of *Glen Echo* uses a photo of a shooting gallery at a Maryland amusement park of the same name. The park was for whites only until the civil rights era, and though protests led management to integrate it in 1961, by the end of the decade it was shuttered. Youssefi sees the park’s downfall as a parable for modern times: something wonderful that’s ultimately destroyed because white people in power refuse to share it with everyone, particularly Black people.

Youssefi says that because she learned early in life what it was like to live simultaneously in two worlds—as an insider and an outsider—she had no trouble anticipating the dangers that the “America First” mindset would create for people who never were allowed through the gates in the first place. It’s a kind of toxic nostalgia for a country that never existed—an attempted erasure of entire demographics. “What it really is, is bullshit—the failure to have the energy to look at things clearly,” she says.

Thankfully *Glen Echo* delivers its own clarity: that pop music sounds more alive when it’s rougher around the edges, and that it’s far more compelling when it’s searching for truth rather than presuming to deliver it. As people grow older they tend to see answers to life’s questions as less definite and more ambiguous, and the music they make can mature in the same way.

“I’ve had a problem for a long time that rock ‘n’ roll is only supposed to express the feelings of teenagers. To me that never made any sense,” Youssefi says. “A friend of mine said it would be too hard to describe something more nuanced in a pop song. I don’t think that’s true. I have far more material now than I had when I was 17.” 📧

🐦 @markguarino

PICK OF THE WEEK

Will Liverman and Paul Sánchez celebrate Black composers and writers on a collaborative album



COURTESY THE ARTIST

WILL LIVERMAN & PAUL SÁNCHEZ, *DREAMS OF A NEW DAY: SONGS BY BLACK COMPOSERS*

Cedille
cedillerecords.org/albums/dreams-of-a-new-day-songs-by-black-composers

WHILE LISTENING TO *Dreams of a New Day: Songs by Black Composers*, the most recent release by operatic baritone Will Liverman with pianist and recital partner Paul Sánchez, I realized with a start that time had ground to a halt. But when? Had the clock stopped with H. Leslie Adams's churning 1992 composition "Amazing Grace"? Was it when Liverman first slipped into his silken falsetto in Damien Sneed's 2017 song "I Dream a World"? Or when Sánchez laid down the searingly injunctive piano chords of Robert Lee Owens's 1969 piece "Genius Child"? I do not know, and it does not matter. *Dreams of a New Day*, which highlights the work of Black composers and writers across several generations, ensconces you in its sonic amber, and you'll welcome the paralysis. Some of these songs are widely performed; all are criminally undervalued. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the album's imprint (Edgewater-based Cedille Records) and Liverman's local connections (he's a Wheaton College grad), works by Chicago composers form the beating heart of *Dreams*. Mid-20th-century composer Margaret Bonds indelibly sets three Langston Hughes poems in 1959's *Dream Portraits*; Liverman imbues "I, Too"—Hughes's sardonic response to Walt Whitman's "I Sing America"—with righteous disdain, and his interpretations of "Minstrel Man" and "Dream Variation" are tender, wrenching, and plainly unforgettable. Liverman tapped Wheaton College professor Shawn Okpebholo, who's also Chicago Opera Theater's incoming Vanguard Emerging Opera Composer, to write *Two Black Churches* (2020), a diptych commemorating the victims of white supremacist violence at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963 and Charleston's Emanuel AME Church in 2015. Sánchez, a Charleston native, plays Okpebholo's haunting harmonies with the brittleness and angularity of broken glass. Liverman's full-chested tone carries plaintive texts by pioneering poet-publisher Dudley Randall and contemporary writer and graphic designer Marcus Amaker (named South Carolina poet laureate in 2016) above the shards and straight to the soul. *Dreams of a New Day* is both timeless and all too timely. —HANNAH EDGAR



Altin Gün © RONA LANE

ALTIN GÜN, YOL

ATO
altingun.bandcamp.com/album/yol

Altin Gün kicked off last year with a Grammy nomination (their 2019 release *Gece* was up for Best World Music Album) and major festival bookings such as South by Southwest and Coachella. But like virtually every other working band, they got sidelined by circumstances beyond their control. Nearly a year later, this group of Dutch, Turkish, and Indonesian musicians, who operate out of Amsterdam, have released their third album, *Yol*, and it's a reminder of the unexpected upsides of misfortune. In an alternate universe where Altin Gün had been able to realize their initial plans to work on *Yol* together in Malibu, rather than over the Internet from their homes, they might have never tapped into the sleek 80s synth-pop sounds and unhurried atmospheres of *Yol*. Because the band are known for interpreting Turkish folk songs through a lens of Turkish psych and Anatolian rock, the new record might at first feel like a detour, but its variety of moods and textures make it seem like Altin Gün could coax any sound under their sonic umbrella. The icy sheen of the synth-driven "Ordunun Dereleri" is melted only by the yearning vocals of singer Erdinç Ecevit Yildiz, and the song segues directly into the charming pop of "Bulunur Mu." The group flip the mood switch again on "Arda Boyları," a Turkish traditional about a woman who drowns herself rather than be forced into an arranged marriage; the band's minimal arrangements and Merve Daşdemir's sweet singing make it feel like the world's saddest lullaby. The single "Kara Toprak," a cover of a song by Turkish poet and musician Aşık Veysel, contemplates the inevitability of death to the accompaniment of funky grooves, spacey effects, and the lush electronic tones of the band's new Omnicord. They also employ that instrument to great effect on the trippy "Sevda Olmasaydı," which leads into the bright disco beat and hooky Turkish rhythms of "Mačka Yolları." When all its parts are summed up, *Yol* provides some much-needed fuel to get us through what with any luck will be our last few months without live music, and it's already

poised to inspire the dance parties of the future.
—JAMIE LUDWIG

ALEX COWLING, ANTARCTICA

Self-released
alexcowling.bandcamp.com/album/antarctica

Over the past few years, Chicago multi-instrumentalist Alex Cowling has released several solo albums that combine weather-beaten indie rock, spacious jazz, and easygoing folk, and he's done it to little or no fanfare. When I ask him about the new *Antarctica*, he tells me that one of the few people who's listened to it is his aunt. I was hooked by the album's lush ensemble recordings while trawling Bandcamp late one night, and I haven't been able to shake them since. Cowling assembled the record piecemeal, working with seven musicians he'd recruited through a variety of channels—he plays with drummer Nick Bolchoz in psych-rock band Local Void, for instance, and he connected with pedal-steel guitarist Mike "Slo-Mo" Brenner through a Craigslist ad.

It took a year and a half for Cowling to turn *Antarctica* from a collection of ideas into a carefully orchestrated album with ample room for sidwinding explorations. He breathes life into its songs by carefully deploying the contributions of his collaborators, including tense mandolin atop dreamy, echoing keys ("47.2172° N, 95.2048° W"), a smoldering sax slicing through regimented guitars ("Never Sympathy"), and a sighing cello that rides a spindly, whimsical bass line ("Pure Human Oil"). His music conjures tranquil winds curling along mountainside pathways, and he drew inspiration from his own forays into nature—the technicolor "Ascending Mt. Avron" takes its name from the highest point in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, which Cowling climbed for the first time on his honeymoon in August. The country-tinged "Cafe Scene" opens sparsely, with hushed vocals floating through arching guitar figures, and then blossoms into serene chamber pop led by sprightly piano. Cowling's gentle voice makes it sound like he's awestruck by wherever he finds himself, and *Antarctica* has reminded me to take the time to listen to and appreciate my own surroundings—as routine as they are these days. —LEOR GALIL



Chris Crack ELIZABETH DE LA PIEDRA

continued from 31
CHRIS CRACK, *MIGHT DELETE LATER*
 Fool's Gold
chriscrack.bandcamp.com/album/might-delete-later

Chris Crack has released five albums of no-frills trash-talking hip-hop in 2020 alone, but he's not worried about saturating the market. When he talked to Audiomack's Matthew Ritchie upon the release of his first album of 2021, *Might Delete Later*, the west-side rapper quipped, "Did Aunt Jemima make too much syrup? Can Clorox ever make too much bleach? Hell no. Because that shit works." Crack is one of many rappers who embrace the "always in the studio" work ethic modeled by Lil Wayne during his legendary late-00s mixtape run, which has proved well-suited for the pandemic. His music fuses Wayne's free association with the scatological humor and braying delivery of Danny Brown, who leveled up from the Detroit underground to the international festival circuit after releasing the 2011 mixtape *XXX* via Brooklyn-based label Fool's Gold. *Might Delete Later*, released February 12, is Crack's own debut for Fool's Gold, though in an era without concerts he'll have to wait a bit to generate a bigger live buzz. He announced the album with lead single "False Evidence Appearing Real," released with a video by local filmmakers New Trash that depicts the rapper lounging around a majestic Illinois nature preserve with a live wolf. It's a visual with the same philosophy as Crack's raps: coolness for its own sake.

For *Might Delete Later*, Fool's Gold founders A-Track and Nick Catchdubs whittled 150 songs down to their 15 favorites—or, as Crack joked in the album's press materials, their 15 favorites that feature samples they could afford to clear. The album sums up the strengths of Crack's flow and beat selection, and it feels like a "best of" collection by an artist who cares more about developing long-term brand loyalty than chasing chart success. *Might Delete Later* feels like lazily floating on a raft through Crack's consciousness, soundtrack by choice loops of funk and R&B. Opening track "If She Ain't 280 She Ain't a Lady" sets the scene:

the narrator starts his day with half-full cans of PBR next to his toothbrush and shrooms in his stomach. True to his love of comedy, Crack fills his verses with vivid character details and half-serious aphorisms. "Fuck this rap shit / I'd rather be a good dad," he raps on "Fapping Ruined My Life," a complete non sequitur in a song that concludes with the narrator cutting up dope in the suburbs to better evade the feds. Though Crack has dissed Chicago and antagonized some of its musicians in interviews and on social media, *Might Delete Later* features several guest appearances from west-side rappers, including CantBuyDeem and Lil Keisha. Cali Hendrix and Roy Kinsey rap together on "Kaiser Permanente," delivering haughty verses that act as smooth counterpoints to Crack's dirty, laid-back hook, which he recorded with a pay-phone-style vocal filter over a moldy keyboard. When Crack closes the track, dropping a quick eight-bar verse with a wired-up delivery, it's a noticeable contrast with that hook, and makes him sound like a hype man and a featured guest on his own song—and that's a product you can rely on. —**JACK RIEDY**

CHUNG HA, *QUERENCIA*
 MNH Entertainment
chunghaofficial.com

Chung Ha's unmistakable ferocity is palpable immediately upon hearing her music or watching her videos. She's among the biggest K-pop artists of the moment, and her rise to stardom wasn't exactly a surprise. She was introduced to the world on the reality show *Produce 101*, and her first audition was a major highlight—the judges immediately recognized her as a star in the making. Chung Ha eventually became one of the program's 11 winners and ended up in the resulting K-pop group, I.O.I. Since 2017, when I.O.I disbanded, Chung Ha has been better able to flaunt her talents through solo work, and on her debut album, *Querencia* (MNH Entertainment), she takes every opportunity to showcase who she is on 21 tracks that employ a multitude of genres. On lead single "Bicycle," fluttering synth chords and dramatic horns highlight the ease with



Hafez Modirzadeh ANDY NOZAKA

which Chung Ha can maneuver between nonchalant and forceful—and in both modes, her voice drips with an assertive cool. Of the album's four singles, "Stay Tonight" is most alluring; its nocturnal, invigorating synth pulses buoy her impassioned cries for a lover to continue their tryst rather than leave in the night. *Querencia* is split into four parts ("Noble," "Savage," "Unknown," and "Pleasures"), which makes the album a more digestible listen, though the songs within each section don't seem tied together by any strong sonic or thematic thread. The production on the majority of these songs is unassailable, but about a third of them feel bloodless; Latin-influenced tracks such as "Masquerade" and "Demente" sound especially predictable in their crossover attempts. But when Chung Ha is on her A game, the results are lustrous: "All Night Long" is sumptuous R&B for sultry slow dances, "Bother Me" is all disco-tinged gloss, and "Flying on Faith" vacillates between serrated electro-pop and piano balladry. The most delightful track is "Unknown," a brief frenetic jungle instrumental interlude that's unlike anything I've ever heard on a mainstream K-pop album. For better or worse, Chung Ha pulls no punches on *Querencia*, and what it lacks in consistency it makes up for in excitement—it's a thrill to watch her stretch herself outside a group context and flex her potential as a solo artist. —**JOSHUA MINSOO KIM**

TERENCE HANNUM, *DISSOLVING THE BONDS*
 Flag Day
flagdayrecordings.bandcamp.com/album/dissolving-the-bonds

Terence Hannum is perhaps best known as the keyboardist and vocalist of prolific Chicago-born experimental metal trio Locrian, who blend dense, crushing drones and harsh, sweeping black metal to stir up some serious dark energy. But Hannum is also an accomplished visual artist, writer, and solo musician. I was expecting his brand-new album, *Dissolving the Bonds*, to contain some Locrian-style dissonance, but when I hit play I was treated to five warm tracks of calming, ambient beauty. These cin-

ematic pieces focus on swelling layers, dreamy melodies, and subtle chanted vocals. The title track nods to John Carpenter synth compositions, and my favorite song, "Tender Resignations," is essentially a pop tune with oscillating organs that recall the sound of the second Suicide record, 1980's *Alan Vega and Martin Rev*, which Ric Ocasek of the Cars produced for no pay. The album culminates with "Everyone Has Gathered Here to Destroy You," a glacial, 15-minute work that buries hypnotic synth patterns under growing and shrinking layers of static. Hannum has an uncanny ability to conjure specific moods, and when it comes to tranquility, *Dissolving the Bonds* is a masterpiece. —**LUCA CIMARUSTI**

HAFEZ MODIRZADEH, *FACETS*
 Pi
hafezmodirzadeh.bandcamp.com/album/facets

Saxophonist Hafez Modirzadeh has spent the better part of 30 years forging connections among jazz, Persian artistic concepts, and free music. This has resulted in a clutch of albums that ping-pong between gutsy postbop and meditative duets, the latter of which come into focus on his new album, *Facets* (Pi). Modirzadeh has frequently worked with Chicago-bred trumpeter Amir ElSaffar, and here he taps pianists Kris Davis, Craig Taborn, and Tyshawn Sorey (better known as a drummer) to accompany him on an expertly and alternately tuned piano in his endeavors to deconstruct equal temperament. Only eight notes have been lowered on the keyboard, but here and in live settings with collaborators such as Vijay Iyer, it seems as if the performers have devised an entirely new mode of expression. On "Facet 34 Defracted," Davis sideswipes the familiar with a playfulness that Modirzadeh's tuning system not only begs for but requires, using a fractured Thelonius Monk progression that draws from a pair of his pieces, "Pannonica" and "Ask Me Now." On the *Facets* version of "Ask Me Now," Modirzadeh and Taborn pirouette around a tonal center, each player tumbling ahead of the other only to hold back for a moment before coalescing around a single note or punctuation of time. The entire

MUSIC



Senyawa © GIGI PRIADJI

endeavor has a disquieting calm—its slowly paced peacefulness is somehow distressing as well as comforting. —**DAVE CANTOR**

LIL ZAY OSAMA, *TRENCH BABY*

Warner
lilzayosamaofficial.com

Chicago rapper Lil Zay Osama broke out about three years ago with the succinct and sorrowful “Changed Up,” which balances punchy, brutal bars against heart-wrenchingly sweet Auto-Tuned singing. Osama’s rise came during the early flourishing of a new wave of drill focused on melody and indebted to scene pillar Lil Durk; “Changed Up” captures the style’s paradoxically guarded-yet-vulnerable soulfulness so perfectly that it could pass for the urtext of melodic drill. This emerging class of geographically scattered Chicago rappers has since brought forth at least one genuine superstar, north-side MC Polo G, and Osama remains a contender. His new mixtape, *Trench Baby* (Warner), is flush with mournful piano, brittle trap percussion, and wounded Auto-Tuned singing. He sometimes wrangles these elements into uplifting, effervescent pop songs, most noticeably on his collaboration with Florida rapper Jackboy, “Ride 4 Me.” But *Trench Baby* is at its most penetrating when Osama transposes his scars into blunt lines and tormented delivery—the one-two punch of “SBA” and “Soul Cry” is strong enough to carry the entire album. —**LEOR GALIL**

NONAGON, *THEY BIRDS*

Controlled Burn
nonagonchicago.bandcamp.com/album/they-birds

You don’t need to read Nonagon’s bio to understand that the Logan Square trio has a soft spot for the great posthardcore bands that shaped American underground rock in the 80s and early 90s. They make that evident with every note of their long-in-the-works debut album, *They Birds* (Controlled Burn): it’s wall-to-wall with twisting bursts

of husky, half-harmonized vocals, vivifying guitar riffs that perfectly balance acerbic with sweet, and brawny rhythms that inject the melodies with locomotive force. The album earns a spot on the proverbial shelf next to classics such as Jawbox’s *Grippe* while maintaining a distinctive autonomy. At the apex of “The Holdouts,” snaggleteoothed guitar cleaves the song’s hulking, seesawing rhythm, sending it spiraling fast in an unexpected direction—and the band constantly uses details like that to sharpen and intensify their already alluring power. —**LEOR GALIL**

SENYAWA, *ALKISAH*

Phantom Limb (and 43 other labels)
phantomlimblabel.bandcamp.com/album/alkisah

“Ideas that are seen as progressive, modern, or radical always have these associations that come from the West,” said Senyawa vocalist Rully Shabara in a February interview with *Reader* contributor Joshua Minsoo Kim for his online music zine Tone Glow. “But is that true?” Shabara, 38, and instrument inventor Wukir Suryadi, 43, founded this Indonesian duo in 2010, and when I first wrote about them in 2014, I said their largely improvised music “combines the ancient gravity of a firelit ritual and the electric futurism of the avant-garde.” Senyawa know they aren’t engaged in a mass-market enterprise, so their artistic practice foregrounds collaboration, decentralization, and mutual support. According to a recent *New York Times* story by Grayson Haver Currin, they license Senyawa-branded sambal, tobacco, and incense for “community relief” in Yogyakarta—and during the pandemic Shabara has drawn hundreds of portraits of strangers in exchange for a promise that each subject would feed a neighbor. The release strategy for Senyawa’s new fifth album, *Alkisah*, involves 44 labels on four continents, each of which the duo provided with graphics and audio files, inviting them to create their own cover art and commission remixes (the various editions have a total of nearly 200 unique bonus tracks). This approach eases the expense of manufacturing (one label can secure a bulk dis-

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Cover art from the Sol Patches album *Vivid Image* DESIGNED BY HHANNA, ARRANGEMENT BY CHASKI NO

continued from 33

count with an order larger than it needs, then sell to other labels at cost) and also spreads out potential royalties, because Senyawa claim no rights to the remixes. “This method,” Suryadi told Tone Glow, “is not about survival of the fittest. It’s survival of those who share.”

While Senyawa have collaborated extensively with peers in the international avant-garde (Keiji Haino, Jerome Cooper, Melt-Banana, Stephen O’Malley), on *Alkisah* they go it alone. Suryadi doesn’t play his famous bambu wukir, which makes a truly confounding range of noises, instead using homemade instruments he calls “spatula,” “industrial mutant,” and “guitar normal.” And his output with these inventions—crackling Tesla-coil screams, huge gonglike bass detonations, ominous gnashing drones—remains so idiosyncratic that I wouldn’t care to guess which is doing what. Shabara’s vocal delivery is just as varied, and on *Alkisah* he sings in several of Indonesia’s hundreds of indigenous languages, including Javanese, Malay, and Minangkabau.

Senyawa like to play with the tension between regular rhythms and chaotic eruptions: on “Alkisah I” a fuzzed-out percussive loop collides unpredictably with colossal warped bonging that sounds like a backhoe attacking a water tower, while “Alkisah II” sets rapid, irregular bass and spindly melodic fragments against mournful cries that move with a much slower metabolism, as though they belong to a different song. “Istana” pairs a crawling doom-metal riff and clouds of cicadalike buzzing with a trumpet-ing, outraged lead vocal that delivers a kind of halting oratory. Shabara’s tremulous, urgent melody on “Kabau” swings from desperate muttering to lonesome howls, while jaunty, melancholy strumming floats perilously atop an oceanic bass drone from which huge, queasy glissandi emerge like breaching whales. The album has the bleakly allegorical feel of a doomsday fairy tale, and that’s essentially what it is: the story of a society trying and failing to find the wisdom to survive an apocalypse. Senyawa believe in maximum heterogeneity as a key part of creating the necessary adaptability and resilience. In art as elsewhere, more voices and ideas—more sharing—means healthier ecosystems. —PHILIP MONTORO

SOL PATCHES, *VIVID IMAGE*

Self-released via Sol y Chaski

solpatches.bandcamp.com/album/vivid-image-2

Multidisciplinary artist Sol Patches left Chicago a few years ago to study at New York University, but our city remains embedded in her work. She opens her new album, *Vivid Image* (self-released via Sol y Chaski), by throwing her voice at a skittering beat that borrows the frenetic energy of footwork, and her rapping glides over the anxious rhythm with nimble assurance. For most of the rest of *Vivid Image*, Patches favors dreamlike synths that sound like they’re moving in reverse or disintegrating into nothingness, an effect that underlines her daring artistic choices. On standout “Mississippi Metaphysics,” she pitches up her voice as she ruminates about her gender abolitionist activism and the dead friends who haunt her present life; as the wider culture inches closer to equitability, her speedy raps race toward a progressive future that much of the world can’t even imagine. Whether or not you can see that future as clearly as Patches, her gentleness throughout *Vivid Image* does a lot to help it feel hopeful. —LEOR GALIL

PAULINE ANNA STROM, *ANGEL TEARS IN SUNLIGHT*

RVNG

igetrvng.com/products/pauline-anna-strom-angel-tears-in-sunlight

Pauline Anna Strom’s new album, *Angel Tears in Sunlight*, features the first new work in 30 years from the legendary Bay Area electronic-music composer. Strom made her album debut with 1982’s *Trans-Millenia Consort*, a limited-edition vinyl and cassette release she’d recorded in her San Francisco home. Despite its humble beginnings, the album has become highly sought-after by devotees of instrumental, synthesizer-driven space music and the tranquil ambient styles loosely grouped under the banner of “new age.” Strom didn’t care to have her music included in the latter category; in a 2017 interview with Red Bull Music Academy she said, “I think there’s a lot of phoniness in the new age



Pauline Anna Strom AUBREY TRINNAMAN

movement.”

The word “phony” doesn’t belong in any description of Strom’s life or work. Born blind in Louisiana in 1946, she grew up in a Roman Catholic household in Kentucky, where she was exposed to church music and learned to play pieces by Chopin and Bach on her family’s living-room organ. She revisited that instrument after marrying and moving to California, where her husband was stationed in the military. She soon began creating her own sounds, playing early synthesizers and exploring tape-manipulation techniques, which became the touchstones for the music on *Trans-Millenia Consort* and the six further releases she put out over the next few years (she adopted “Trans-Millenia Consort” as her pseudonym starting with her second album, 1983’s *Plot Zero*). By the end of the 80s, Strom had largely stopped creating new music, and sold off her equipment to help pay for the rising cost of living in San Francisco; she studied the healing arts and eventually became a reiki master. Her albums remained relatively obscure until 2017, when RVNG released *Trans-Millenia Music*, a compilation featuring 80 minutes of Strom’s work culled from her 1980s discography. The subsequent attention motivated Strom to create new music, so she bought new synthesizers and worked alongside the people at RVNG to record and produce *Angel Tears in Sunlight*. Listening to the album is a bittersweet experience, because Strom passed away in December at age 74, two months before *Angel Tears* was released. The ambient compositions on *Angel Tears* are mesmerizing and light, full of the energy of a creator in top form who’s excitedly exploring her new instruments—it’s hard not to feel the loss of the music she would’ve made next. The album kicks off with the ebullient “Tropical Convergence,” based on a chorus of layered chimes and marimba-like tones, and the dramatic second track, “Marking Time,” completely shifts gears with its scattering of somber, genderless choral samples. *Angel Tears in Sunlight* is a marvel of a swan song for an artist who’s finally getting her due. —SALEM COLLO-JULIN

SUNBURNED HAND OF THE MAN, *PICK A DAY TO DIE*

Three Lobed

threelobed.bandcamp.com/album/pick-a-day-to-die

Sunburned Hand of the Man are a loose Boston-based collective whose work has sprawled across multiple genres, including free improv, noise, folk, drone, and psychedelic jams. Founded in 1997 out of the ashes of art-rock trio Shit Spangled Banner, they became part of a scene that specialized in indulgence and reveled in long builds, endless permutation, improvisation, and minimalism that could get pretty damn maximal at the drop of a hat (or the stomp of a pedal). In the late 2000s, Sunburned Hand of the Man’s output slowed to a handful of cassettes and DIY recordings, but in 2019 they resurfaced with their first proper LP in about a decade, *Headless*. Their brand-new album, *Pick a Day to Die*, is remarkable, and not just because it’s a true studio album from a band that’s more likely to record live (the recent *Live Burn 6* was recorded live in London in 2004 and 2006). The rolling trance build of the title track wouldn’t feel out of place on a record by Can or even Stereolab, except it’s delivered with lyrics and vocals that might’ve come from an artistically evolved Hasil Adkins. I’d almost forgotten how much I missed this group’s reliable unpredictability—the sense that it’s all about to go off the rails at any moment, but never quite does, or at least never does in an unsatisfying way. While much of the album has a somber quality, its ferocious jams boil over with playful, uninhibited joy; they’re grounded in garage rock and the kind of psychedelic rock enjoyed by hippie bikers who might protect their pot patch with land mines. “Flex” is more mellow, with a spacey 70s swagger, sweet keyboards, and a coy groove that makes it feel like bachelor-pad music for people who enjoy taking psychedelic trips on the Autobahn in their heads. *Pick a Day to Die* unfolds its rich variety with nearly perfect pacing: the slinky, insinuating slow burn of “Solved” has a smoldering Iggy Pop vibe, while the raunchy but celestial “Prix Fixe” elevates its space-caveman psych with beautiful lead guitar from guest star J. Mascis. Every one of us will have our day to die, but until then, this record can give us life. —MONICA KENDRICK



CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

Zak Kiernan, maker of dungeon synth and comfy synth

“When someone reads you those Hans Christian Andersen stories when you’re young, this is the music that’s playing in your mind.”

As told to PHILIP MONTORO

Zak Kiernan, 37, moved to Chicago in 2012 and has worked for eight years as a video editor and sound designer at Leo Burnett. He makes ambient black metal as Adrasteia, which has a split with Celestial Sword coming later this year on Greek label His Wounds. His dungeon-synth project, Alkith, will release The Shores of Evermeet this week on Chicago label Wrought Records, and will appear in April on the second volume of the Dungeon Synth Magazine cassette compilation series by Italian imprint Heimat der Katastrophe. Kiernan is also about to make his debut in the young genre of comfy synth: his project Derbyshire will appear on a split with local Redwall-themed comfy-synth act Cherry Cordial.

My dad is a musician—he’s a luthier—and he and my brother own a small guitar and ukulele shop in the Big Island of Hawaii. When I was young, while my brother and everyone else was picking up guitars, I was really attracted to hip-hop. My first instrument was a pair of turntables. I started mixing and scratching, and that kinda naturally made its way into making beats.

My musical taste expanded beyond hip-hop to include electronic music, metal, et cetera. I moved to New York City to become an audio engineer, and I went to school for that. I had a crappy old Casio keyboard that I found in a dumpster, an old drum machine, and a four-track that my heroin-addicted roommate gave me for rent money. I lived in this big crazy loft

Zak Kiernan is a fan of tabletop adventure game *Mice and Mystics*, which inspired the name of his comfy-synth project, *Derbyshire*. PHOTO BY WULFKA

building. I’d set up all of my gear and welcome anyone from the building—who were all a bunch of creative young people—to just drop by the apartment and have a jam, and I’d record it to tape.

The Doom Cult was something I came up with when I moved out here to Chicago. I needed a place to take all of these old projects I had on tape and various hard drives—I wanted to put it all under one umbrella. A lot of that stuff was experimental—it ranged from electronic music to punk to black metal to just strange rantings.

Around 2016, I had taken a break from making music and was really focusing on my career. I just felt this lack, you know, of creativity. So I decided to just start a project—I called it Z.K. (you’ll find it under that Doom Cult banner), and I did a sort of dark ambient album called *A Sea of Stars*. That’s really what started the train toward dungeon synth and black metal. Then I got a guitar, and that’s when Adrasteia and Alkith began.

Dungeon synth is an offshoot of black metal. It really started in the mid-90s, when the Norwegian second wave of black metal was popular. “Dungeon synth” just meant those instrumental interludes between songs. There was one particular guy, Mortiis, who became the figurehead of the genre. He used to be in Emperor, and he started putting out demo tapes that just got really big and could be classified as metal, but it wasn’t—it was all synth music.

Other artists from that time who were doing specifically dungeon-synth stuff aren’t as well-known—names like Secret Stairways, Solanum, Jim Kirkwood. They had so many different variations of the sound that were so far removed from black metal but kept that ethos and aesthetic—the underground ethos, the xeroxed images, the corpsepaint. But you pop the tape in, and it’s a bunch of synthesizer sounds.

The name is relatively new—it wasn’t called dungeon synth at the time. Most people just thought of it as, like, “dark ambient.” The name dungeon synth was more like in the 2010s. The term was really birthed out of nostalgia for Dungeons & Dragons and tabletop role-playing.

For most people, at first, dungeon synth is, like, a funny thing. The first time you hear some of those old dungeon-synth recordings, where it’s just like a guy screeching over some

keyboards, you might find yourself laughing—although if you ask those guys, they probably were very serious at the time. I think there’s now definitely a sense of humor involved in dungeon synth—and I think that’s prevalent with the rise of comfy synth.

It’s evoking nostalgia in sound, so there’s something kind of funny to it—you’re hearing music that sounds like it could be in an old video game, inspired by those old dungeon crawlers from the 90s that you played on a PC with a floppy disk.

I first saw comfy synth popping up really big last year, maybe a little before that. I think the first thing I heard was Grandma’s Cottage. Everyone was like, “What the fuck is this.” But for some reason I really latched onto it.

Comfy synth uses usually major-key melodies. In dungeon synth, a lot of that stuff is in a minor scale—that’s one of the bigger differences. The songs are short, playful, whimsical, and meant to evoke a feeling or an image—these happy-ish memories. But not always happy.

Grandma’s Cottage kinda blew up overnight, and I think the other big one was Tiny Mouse. That’s the same guy—he does Tiny Mouse, Grandma’s Cottage, and he also kinda started another strange subgenre of dungeon synth called dino synth. He has a project called Diplodocus. I’d have to credit this one anonymous guy—he runs a label called Dungeons Deep—as being the creator of comfy synth.

You’ll notice when it comes to black metal and dungeon synth, a lot of it’s run by the same people—there’ll be, like, ten projects, and you’re like, “Oh, that’s all one guy.”

When you look at, say, the Grandma’s Cottage album, you’re like, OK, I almost know exactly what this is supposed to sound like. So you think of old Dutch oil paintings of food, or a painting of a cottage along a road. A lot of it has to do with childhood memories. And because it’s not so specific as, say, a dungeon, it’s a little more broad, it can go from just an image, an aesthetic—it can encompass these mushroom-based synth projects that I keep seeing popping up. Yes, that is its own thing.

A lot of it really comes down to a sense of being comfortable around a fire with food. You’re watching the snow come down around you and you’re inside your house and it’s warm, maybe there’s a fire, there’s food everywhere. It definitely has a fairy-tale feeling. When someone reads you those Hans Chris-

MUSIC



Zak Kiernan as Adrasteia (left) and as Alkilith  COURTESY THE ARTIST

continued from 35

tian Andersen stories when you're young, this is the music that's playing in your mind.

Locally, I don't know if anyone outside of Cherry Cordial and I are doing it. Local label Wrought Records recently put out a project called Warm Smial. Other acts worth mentioning in comfy synth would be Olde Fox Den—I think Cherry Cordial also has a split with him that just came out. Goose Mother is another. I've mentioned Tiny Mouse. There's one in particular that I'm really loving right now—it's called Snowy Hill House. Another huge favorite of mine, I don't know if you can call it comfy synth—it's a Lord of the Rings-themed synth project called Hole Dweller. They have this very lo-fi approach, you know, that feeling of being at the Shire, and having your pipe-weed and your wheel of cheese. And some of the adventure.

My first comfy-synth release will be a split with Cherry Cordial, which is a Redwall-themed comfy synth project. Redwall was a series of books by Brian Jacques—anthropomorphic mice and small critters go through this beautiful, huge, mythical, epic story. I definitely read all those books when I was young. My project's called Derbyshire. Derbyshire is named after a type of cheese that's used in a tabletop game called Mice and Mystics—you're basically a bunch of mice who go on this epic quest. You use wheels of cheese as a sort of hit-point system, and the kind of cheese is called Derbyshire.

I'm tailoring almost all of my thematic elements of this project around food. I love to cook. I guess "food obsessed" would be the real word, if you ask my wife.

It's about nostalgia. It's about those moments when you're knee-deep in an RPG game

with your friends, and you're eating some cheese and crackers—or it could just be yourself, envisioned in the game, and your character is foraging for food.

I've had a lot of output musically since quarantine. For my day job, I was downtown every day and working 50-60 hours, so finding time to do music was really hard. It's like 11 o'clock, everyone's in bed, I'm finally in the studio making something. Since quarantine happened, I've set up my studio to be my home office.

This sense of—especially last year—having to let go of what is happening in the world, how it affects you, was a big part of it. Sometimes you just feel so powerless to see all this hatred and this ugliness brewing up, and it was important to have an outlet. And my outlet's always been music. So now I've streamlined everything, and I can basically make music whenever I want. It's a part of my routine to practice and make something once a day. Just this last year, I put out at least ten different albums.

Black metal is always this cathartic release—I'm screaming, I'm playing as fast and as hard as I possibly can, I'm evoking a sense of tragedy and dread. This is a lens in which I'm filtering all of this fucking political turmoil and terribleness through. But at the same time, there needs to be the opposite side of that.

Comfy synth was a natural. Like, "You know what, there are beautiful moments that happen in this quarantine, in this political climate, that we forget about." And sometimes those things are worth preserving in a musical way. 

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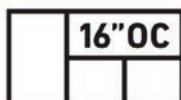
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Nnedi Okorafor Author

Nnedi Okorafor is an international award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy for both children and adults. The more specific terms for her works are Africanfuturism and Africanjuism. Her many works include *Who Fears Death*, winner of the World Fantasy Award and in development at HBO as a TV series; the Nebula and Hugo Award-winning novella trilogy *Binti*, in development at Hulu as a TV series; the Lodestar and Locus Award-winning *Akata* series; and her most recent novella *Remote Control*. Her debut novel *Zahrah the Windseeker* won the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature. Okorafor is busy adapting Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* for TV with Amazon Studios, and she currently lives with her daughter Anyaugo in Phoenix, Arizona. Learn more about Okorafor at nnedi.com and follow her on Twitter (@Nnedi), Facebook, and Instagram.



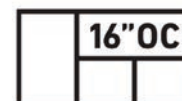
Jill Hopkins - Moderator

Jill Hopkins is the host of *Jill Afternoons* on Vocolo Radio, the *Making Beyonce* podcast for WBEZ, and *The Opus* podcast for Consequence of Sound. She's also a comedic essayist and culture journalist with bylines at The Onion's A.V. Club, Vice's Noisey, the *Chicago Reader*, and more. In addition to writing and hosting, in the Before Times, you could find Jill DJing and playing in rock bands in Chicago. But, these days, you can find her almost exclusively at her desk in her attic.

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Griffin Crowder 3/19, 8 PM, Carol's Pub

Crown Vic Royal 3/27, 7 PM, Banana's Comedy Shack at Reggie's

Priya Darshini featuring House of Waters 3/27, 1:30 PM, First Presbyterian Church of Evanston, outdoors in the church's parking lot, presented by SPACE, donations accepted for New Life Shelter in Rogers Park **FREE**

Daughtry 3/12, 8 PM, livestream at gigs.live/events/daughtry-live-nashville

Fatal Order, Misfit Toyz 3/13, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet, 18+

Floriography featuring Molaq, Ed Wilkerson, Viola Yip, Brittany J. Green 3/7, 2 PM, livestream at ess.org **FREE**

Gaelic Storm 3/17, 7 PM, livestream at gaelicstorm.com

Giraffage 3/5, 8 PM; 3/8, 8 PM; 3/10, 8 PM; 3/12, 8 PM, livestream at twitvh.tv/giraffage **FREE**

Girls With Impact International Women's Day

Concert featuring Renée Elise Goldsberry, Fletcher, Madison Reyes, and more 3/8, 5 PM, livestream at girlswithimpact.org

Growing Concerns Poetry Collective 3/12, 1 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv **FREE**

Hairbangers Ball, St. Jimmy 3/27, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet, 18+

In the Kitchen with Patrick Hallahan 3/7, 5 PM, online cooking series with the drummer from My Morning Jacket, livestream at events.seated.com

Emmylou Harris & Steve Earle 4/3, 8 PM, livestream at citywinery.com

Japanese Breakfast, Chai 3/12, 8 PM, livestream at bandsintown.com

Zara Larsson 3/8, 8 PM, livestream at youtube.com/c/ZaraLarssonOfficial **FREE**

Leland Blue 3/9, 1 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv **FREE**

Aubrey Logan 3/25, 8 PM; 4/22, 8 PM; 5/20, 12 and 8 PM, livestream at aubreylogan.veeps.com

Maggie Miles 3/8, 1 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv **FREE**

Mandancing 3/26, 4 PM; livestream at audiotree.tv **FREE**

Nightwish 5/28, 2 PM; 5/29, 7 PM, livestream at nightwish.com

Liam Nugent 3/12, 8 PM, Carol's Pub

Oates Song Fest 7908 featuring Bob Weir, Daryl Hall, Dave Grohl, Sammy Hagar, Jim James, Keb' Mo', Shawn Colvin, Michael Franti, Malina Moye, Big Kenny, Jim Lauderdale, Sheila E, John Oates, Dan & Shay, Michael McDonald, Darius Rucker, and more 3/20, 8 PM, livestream at

youtube.com/user/nugsnet **FREE**

Of Perception (Doors tribute) 3/20, 7:30 PM, the Forge, Joliet, 18+

Over the Side 3/26, 8 PM, Carol's Pub

PBJ 3/9, 8 PM; 3/16, 8 PM; 3/23, 8 PM, Reggie's Music Joint

Place of Assembly podcast featuring Wave Farm and hosts Sam Hillmer and Melissa Auf der Maur 3/15, 8:30 PM, livestream at ess.org **FREE**

John Primer & the Real Deal Blues Band 3/5, 9:30 PM, livestream at rosaslounge.com **FREE**

Charlie Puth 3/31, 8 PM, livestream at yoop.app

Royce 5'9" 3/11, 7 PM, livestream at yoop.app

Space Campfire Corral featuring Jon Langford 3/5, 5 and 7 PM, Union Squared Evanston's patio, Evanston

St. Paul & the Broken Bones 3/12, 8 PM, livestream at fans.live

Tedeschi Trucks Band 3/11, 7 PM; 3/18, 7 PM; 3/25, 7 PM, livestream at nugs.net

Tiffany 3/20, 4 PM, livestream at tiffany.veeps.com

Wardruna 3/26, 3 PM, livestream at wardruna.com

Matthew West 3/7, 7 PM, livestream at universe.com

Wild Feathers 4/4, 8 PM; 4/11, 8 PM; 4/18, 8 PM, livestream at nugs.tv

Winter's Jazz Revival featuring Jeremy Kahn Trio, Elaine Dame, Victor Goines, Bruce Henry, Russ Phillips, Dee Alexander, Bobby Lewis, and more 3/5-3/7, 7 PM, livestream at wintersjazzclub.com **FREE**

DJ Z-Trip 3/11, 9 PM, livestream at insomniac.com **FREE**

UPDATED

Peter Bradley Adams 3/25, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, postponed

Black Pumas 4/26-4/27, 9 PM, House of Blues, 4/27 sold out, 17+

Dragonforce 3/23, 6 PM, House of Blues, canceled

EOB 6/5, 7:30 PM, Metro, canceled

Fu Manchu 3/24, 9 PM, Bottom Lounge, postponed, 17+

Trevor Hall 4/22/2022, 7:30 PM, the Vic, rescheduled, 18+

Greg Howe, Bodhi 8/27/2022, 7 PM, Reggie's Rock Club, rescheduled, 17+

Joywave 6/16, 8 PM, Subterranean, canceled

Kaleo, Belle 4/30/2022, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom, rescheduled

Stephen Marley 3/27, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, postponed

Peter Mulvey, Sistastrings 3/11, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, postponed

Murder by Death 11/16, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, rescheduled, 17+

Okilly Dokilly, Steaksauce Mustache 5/1/2022, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, rescheduled

Graham Parker 10/16, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Parsonsfield, Oshima Brothers 3/30, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

Chuck Prophet & the Mission Express 3/18, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, postponed

Lauren Sanderson 4/13, 7:30 PM, Subterranean, canceled

Amanda Shires, Jade Jackson 4/21, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

Bria Skonberg 3/14, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston, canceled

Watsky 10/1, 7 PM, Metro, rescheduled

Dar Williams 10/30, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music, rescheduled

Alicia Witt 4/16, 7:30 PM, Uncommon Ground, postponed

Zucchero 3/10, 7:30 PM, the Vic, postponed, 18+

UPCOMING

NOTE: Reopening dates in light of COVID-19 guidelines are subject to change. We suggest that you contact the venue or point of ticket purchase to confirm.

Agnostic Front, Sick of It All, Crown of Thornz 4/25, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Align, Tvvinn, Levity 5/13, 8:30 PM, Schubas, 18+

America 10/30, 8 PM, Rialto Square Theatre, Joliet

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Apocalyptica, Lacuna Coil 9/5, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+

ARC Music Festival 9/4-9/5, Union Park

Ólafur Arnalds 10/27, 7:30 PM, Art Institute of Chicago, Rubloff Auditorium

Sebastian Bach, Stitched Up Heart 6/9, 7:30 PM, Joe's Live, Rosemont

Randy Bachman & Burton Cummings 8/14, 8 PM, Rosemont Theatre, Rosemont

Julien Baker, Mini Trees 3/25, 8 PM, livestream at audiotree.tv

Brevet 4/9, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Deftones, Gojira, Poppy 8/17, 7 PM, Huntington Bank Pavilion

Dirty Knobs with Mike Campbell 10/6, 8 PM, Park West, 18+

Enrique Iglesias, Ricky Martin, Sebastián Yatra 9/30-10/1, 7:30 PM, Allstate Arena, Rosemont

Boney James, Marcus Miller 9/24, 8 PM, the Venue at Horseshoe Casino, Hammond

Elton John 2/4/2022-2/5/2022, 8 PM, United Center

Alanis Morissette, Garbage, Liz Phair 9/11, 7 PM, Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre, Tinley Park

Satsang 5/14, 8 PM, Martyrs', rescheduled

Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox 9/30, 8 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan

Secret Sisters, Logan Ledger 5/21, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Susan Werner 10/22, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Wilco, Sleater-Kinney, Nnamdi 8/28, 6 PM, Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park

David Wilcox 10/15, 8 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music

Windy City Gospel Celebration featuring Marvin Sapp, Donnie McClurkin, Ricky Dillard, LeAndria Johnson, Jekalyn Carr 5/9, 7 PM, House of Hope

Wood Brothers 11/6, 8 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+

Yam Haus 6/25, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+

Peter Yarrow & Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul & Mary 10/9, 7 PM, Genesee Theatre, Waukegan

Dwight Yoakam 3/7, 8 PM; 3/14, 8 PM; 3/28, 8 PM, livestream at mandolin.com



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

ON FEBRUARY 20, Michael Dedmon opened Evanston's newest music store, **Black Squirrel Records**. Dedmon is a dedicated record fiend who began buying up entire collections a decade ago, and so far all of Black Squirrel's stock has come directly from his personal holdings. The store's inventory includes rock, reggae, electronic music, jazz, soul, country, blues, and world music. Dedmon says a neighbor of his owns the 450-square-foot storefront at **1620 Greenleaf Street**, and he's wanted to open a record store there for a few years. When it became available about a month ago, he secured a short-term rental with the hope of transforming it into a long-term endeavor. For now he mostly runs the place himself, with a little help from a friend and his friend's daughter. "Everyone who walks in has a smile on their face," Dedmon says. "Or I think they do, because they have masks on."

Gossip Wolf has long hailed the virtuosic string shredding, herculean productivity, and synergetic programming of Chicago's **Spektral Quartet**. During the COVID-induced absence of concerts, violinists **Clara Lyon** and **Maeve Feinberg**, violist **Doyle Armbrust**, and cellist **Russell Rolan** have continued to engage their audience via a series of Zoom Q&A sessions called **New Music Help Desk**. In keeping with the quartet's collaborative spirit, previous events have included composers Alex Temple, Allison Loggins-Hull, and Chris Fisher-Lochhead, and the next one features Pulitzer-winning Chinese composer **Du Yun**. It's on Friday, March 5, at 3 PM, and though it's free to attend, you must register at Spektral's website.

After he lost his job last fall, **Sueves** singer-guitarist **Joe Schorgl** moved to Cleveland to build a recording and art studio. This wolf will miss seeing his gig posters around town, but the Sueves are still going strong—Schorgl will release the trio's frenetic new album, **Tears of Joy**, via his **Magicalatalog** label on Friday, March 5. —J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.

WOLF BY KETH HERZIK

SAVAGE LOVE

My husband has been sexting with his cousin

This incest-adjacent relationship doesn't mean he's unfaithful.

By **DAN SAVAGE**

Q: I am at a loss. I am devastated. I just found out my husband has been sexting with another woman. As if that wasn't bad enough, this woman is his first cousin! And this has been going on for years!

I'll give you a moment to recover from that jaw drop.

OK, now the background. We've been married for almost 30 years. Our relationship is not all wine and roses but we had counseling years ago and decided we wanted to grow old together. We have similar interests, we love spending time together, and it's just not the same when one of us is gone. Our sex life was never "off the charts" and, yes, this was one of our main problems. He wanted a lot of sex and I was content with very little. I came to believe he was content too and that he long ago accepted that spending his life with me meant this would be how it was. And I truly believed that our marriage was monogamous. Now I know that only I was monogamous.

If it was any other woman than his cousin I might be able to deal with this. I wish it was someone else. I feel trapped! I feel like I can't talk to anyone! All I can think of is how disgusting and disappointed my children, who are in their 20s, and his family would be if they found out. This cousin has had many ups and downs. And years ago when my children were small I noticed some flirtatious behavior between her and my husband. I confronted him and demanded to know

what the hell was going on. I thought that was the end of it! I was wrong.

I was on my husband's iPad when I found their explicit chats along with requests for "visuals." I went to my husband and asked if they had ever gotten together physically. He told me no. A few days later we were on our way to a big family event and this cousin was supposed to be there. With me standing next to him he called her and left a message disinviting her. She called him back and he answered on speaker and I said hello and then asked her if she was fucking my husband. She sounded surprised and caught off guard but she said no. We are about to move to a new place to retire. Now what?!? —**INSANE NEWS: COUSINS EROTIC SEXTING TROUBLE!**

A: Your husband didn't fuck his cousin—or so he says—but even if he did fuck his cousin, INCEST, that's not incest. Don't get me wrong: most people are thoroughly squicked out at the thought of cousins fucking. And cousin fucking is, in fact, incest-adjacent enough that most people can't distinguish it from actual incest. But you know what does make a distinction between incest and cousin fucking? The law. First-cousin marriages aren't legal in all U.S. states but they're legally recognized in almost all states. They're also legal and legally recognized in Canada, Mexico, the UK, the EU, Russia, and on and on. And since people are expected to fuck the people

they marry, INCEST, it would seem that cousin couples—even first-cousin couples—are not legally considered incestuous. Mark Antony, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein all married first cousins. The actress Greta Scacchi married her first cousin.

Your husband's cousin says she isn't fucking your husband. Seems to me that this is one of those cases where, even if you suspect you're being lied to, you should take what you've been told at face value and avoid looking for evidence that might contradict it.

Your marriage is still monogamous . . . if you define cheating narrowly. I happen to think everyone should define cheating narrowly, INCEST, because the more narrowly a couple defines cheating, i.e. the fewer things that "count" as cheating, the likelier that couple is to remain successfully monogamous as the decades grind on. Conversely, the more things a couple defines as cheating, INCEST, the less likely it becomes that their marriage will remain monogamous over the years. So . . . if you would still like to regard your marriage as monogamous . . . don't define sexting as cheating and you're in the clear.

Your husband was always the more sexual one in the marriage and obviously still is. He made his peace with having less sex than he might've liked over the last three decades because he loves you and wants to be with you. But he apparently

needed an outlet, something to masturbate about, and someone in his life who made him feel desirable. And if he was going to swap indecent texts with someone to meet those needs, maybe . . . just maybe . . . it was better he did it with this woman than with someone else.

As terrible as it is to contemplate, INCEST, the incest-adjacent nature of this connection was an insurance policy of sorts. Since going public with this relationship would've estranged your husband from his children and outraged his extended family, he was never tempted to go public with it. While she wasn't an ideal choice, and while a cousin wouldn't be my choice, she wasn't someone your husband would or could ever leave you for, right?

Your children would prob-

ably be disgusted to learn their father was swapping sexts with anyone, INCEST, and they would doubtless be even more disgusted to learn their father was swapping sexts with his cousin. So don't tell them.

Your husband isn't going anywhere. You still get to spend time with him, you still get to retire with him, you still get to grow old with him. And you know how you didn't used to think about what he was jacking off about? Back before you stumbled over those explicit chats? Well, with a little effort and maybe a pot edible or two . . . or three . . . or four . . . you can return to not thinking about whatever your husband might be looking at when he jacks off.

And finally . . .

Your family shouldn't be

getting together for "big events" in the middle of a pandemic—unless you don't want to live long enough to retire. Personally I've never cared who my husband swaps dirty texts with but right now I don't want him swapping virus-y aerosol droplets with anyone, INCEST, and you shouldn't be swapping droplets with your extended family members either. So if you wanna avoid this cousin for the time being without having to tell your adult children or the rest of the family what's been going on, cancel all family gatherings, big and small, until everyone is vaccinated. **✉**

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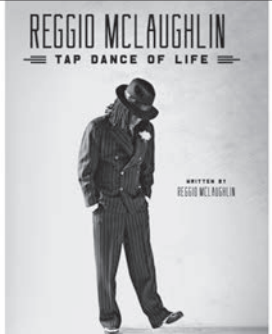
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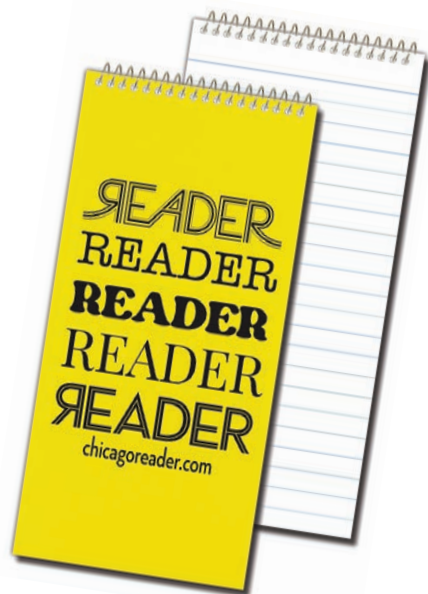
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AIDS @40



From an ACT UP protest in the late 1980s, downtown Chicago.
Photo by Lisa Howe-Ebright

**In this issue, Windy City Times speaks with long-term HIV/
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WINDY CITY TIMES

VOL 36, NO. 2 MARCH 4, 2021

WHAT'S HERE
Long-term HIV/AIDS survivors in Chicago reflect on their experiences 3
HIV at 40: Long-term AIDS survivor Sean Strub on his diagnosis, being a mayor and Larry Kramer 6
Forty years later, still a call for accurate HIV-positive representation 8
Tania Unzueta: Fighting for justice, one cause at a time 10
PrEP options likely to change following Truvada patent expiration 12

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STILL HERE:

Long-term HIV/AIDS survivors in Chicago reflect on their experiences

BY CARRIE MAXWELL



This article features the stories of survivors (top row, from left) Rae Lewis-Thornton, Jeff Berry, David Ernesto Munar, (bottom row, from left) state Rep. Greg Harris and Peter McLoyd. Lewis-Thornton photo by Flickr Thornton; Berry photo by John Gress; Munar photo courtesy of Howard Brown Health; Harris photo courtesy of Harris; McLoyd photo courtesy of McLoyd

When the first reported U.S. cases of what later became known as HIV/AIDS were reported in June 1981, a number of physicians and researchers at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and elsewhere sought to understand the disease and its origins. This awareness increased over the course of that year, and years going forward, as the media, especially gay media, informed the public of the disease.

According to HIV.gov, “by [the end of 1981] there [was] a cumulative total of 337 reported cases of individuals with severe immune deficiency in the United States, 321 adults/adolescents and 16 children under age 13. Of those cases, 130 are already dead by December 31.”

As the number of HIV/AIDS cases grew over the years, the death toll climbed. By the end of 1984—before then-President Ronald Reagan acknowledged in public that the disease existed—approximately 7,700 cases of HIV were reported in America. Of those people, 3,700 died of the disease, according to Avert.org. This was the year HIV/AIDS became an epidemic.

It was only when a reporter asked Reagan about AIDS on Sept. 17, 1985, that he acknowledged its existence publicly. According to an AIDS.gov timeline report, 30 Years of HIV/AIDS, Reagan’s response to that reporter included “[calling] AIDS ‘a top priority’ and [defending] his administration against criticisms that funding for AIDS research is inadequate.”

By the end of 1989, 117,508 people in the United States were diagnosed with AIDS; of those, 89,343 of them died of the disease, according to amfAR.org. These numbers grew over the course of the next five years with about the same percentages of total AIDS cases reported to the number of total deaths. Meanwhile, researchers were working on drug therapies to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS.

In 1995, the FDA approved the first protease inhibitor, otherwise known as the “AIDS cocktail.” According to Avert.org, once this highly active antiretroviral treatment (HAART) “AIDS cocktail” was “incorporated into clinical practice, [it] brought about an immediate decline of between 60-80 percent in rates of AIDS-related deaths and hospitalizations in those countries which could afford it,” including the United States.

According to amfAR.org, “[In 1996] for the first time since the start of the epidemic, the number of Americans dying from AIDS declines, dropping 23 percent from the previous year. The decline is attributed primarily to the success of the new combination therapies.”

“[Then] in September 1997, the FDA approved Combivir, a combination of two antiretroviral drugs, taken as a single daily tablet, making it easier for people living with HIV to take their medication,” according to Avert.org.

These new drugs/therapies, and others developed and put into use since then, have given people living with HIV/AIDS hope that they would not die like many did in those first 16 years.

Among the people diagnosed in the early years of the disease are five Chicagoans—Emmy-winning AIDS activist and ordained minister Rae Lewis-Thornton (diagnosed in 1987), Illinois

Turn to page 4

Continued from page 3

state Rep. and House Majority Leader Greg Harris (diagnosed in 1988), TPAN Director of Publications and Positively Aware Editor-in-Chief Jeff Berry (diagnosed in 1989), Howard Brown Health President and CEO David Ernesto Munar (diagnosed in 1994), and Ruth M. Rothstein CORE Center Consumer Development and Advocacy Coordinator Peter McLoyd (diagnosed in 1997).

Lewis-Thornton, a 57-year-old Black cisgender straight woman, found out from the Red Cross that she was HIV-positive after donating blood. Her memoir *Unprotected*, chronicling this journey, will be released later this year.

"In fact, I organized the blood drive because of blood shortages in Washington D.C., where I lived at the time," said Lewis-Thornton. "People were afraid to donate blood because of HIV/AIDS. I thought it was stupid that people actually thought you could contract HIV from donating blood."

When Lewis-Thornton found out about her HIV-positive status, she said her initial reaction was shock because she did not meet the stereotypes of who could contract HIV. At the time, she said her only solace was that the Red Cross representative told her that she may never contract AIDS; however, in 1992, Lewis-Thornton's HIV-positive status turned into an AIDS diagnosis.

Harris, a 65-year-old white cisgender gay man, was first diagnosed with HIV and then, in 1990, with AIDS.

"My reaction at first was panic, and then deep depression and feeling hopeless watching all my friends get sick and die," said Harris. "I think I coped with that in two ways: throwing myself into volunteering for community organizations and also substance abuse."

Berry, a 62-year-old white cisgender gay man, said that although he was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, he believes he contracted it in the early to mid-1980s.

"When I received my test results, I was scared because many of my friends had already died or were sick at the time," said Berry. "My doctor told me he could not treat me as he did not have any patients with HIV, and referred me to the HIV clinic at Northwestern. I went home and cried."

Munar, a 51-year-old Latinx cisgender gay man and first-generation American whose parents emigrated from Columbia, was in a monogamous relationship at the time of his diagnosis.

"I was completely shocked because I had tested negative six months prior," said Munar. "Because there were no effective treatments at the time, I feared I would not live to see my 35th birthday. Stigma, fear and shame contributed to a deep depression that lasted years, a period when I confided in very few people."

McLoyd, a 68-year-old Black cisgender straight man, found out he was HIV-positive on Valentine's Day, two weeks after being tested at the Chicago Department of Public Health clinic.

"I spent those two weeks knowing that whether the test results were positive or negative, my using days had run its course," said McLoyd. "I was actively using heroin and cocaine and expected the test to return positive, but I was

stunned to learn that I had fewer than 25 CD4 cells, PCP pneumonia and other opportunistic infections."

Lewis-Thornton's treatment began when she enrolled in a National Institutes for Health (NIH) study. She went every six months but did not tell her primary care physician (PCP) about her status. When Lewis-Thornton was put on AZT, she finally told her PCP who had no idea what to do for her and told her to defer to whatever the NIH doctor recommended. Lewis-Thornton said she finally received proper medical care when her HIV converted into AIDS.

"I ended up at the Women and Children HIV Clinic at Cook County Hospital, now the CORE Center, where I continue to receive excellent care to this day," said Lewis-Thornton. "I think, had it not been for the director of the clinic, Dr. Mardge Cohen, I would have died. I came to the right place with the right physician at the right time."

Harris echoed what Lewis-Thornton said in that there was only a small handful of doctors

Hospital and later at the CORE Center, where he, like Lewis-Thornton, still receives care to this day. He is glad that so much more is known today about HIV and the anti-retroviral treatments have been improving over time.

Lewis-Thornton, Harris and Berry were all given AZT at first to treat their HIV. Lewis-Thornton said she was given all the first-generation HIV medications and at one time she had to take 32 pills a day that resulted in "horrible side effects" like fatigue, diarrhea, nausea and headaches but she "kept pressing on." Even today her drug combo is six pills a day along with other medications.

For Harris, the dosing regime was really difficult and complicated to maintain. Like Lewis-Thornton, the side effects were really bad and "often worse than the disease itself, some of which I am still dealing with. The newer drugs are like one or two pills a day and barely any side effects. It is a world of difference, however; they are still very expensive, so accessing them and the diagnostic testing they require are still

cocktail was changed. McLoyd was prescribed the protease inhibitor Indinavir and replaced the AZT with Stavudine.

"There was not as much discussion about racial disparities in healthcare that I recall, but it was disappointing to hear my white peers talk about their three drug regimen when I was only prescribed two," he said.

When asked what she would now tell her younger self, Lewis-Thornton said she wished she had known the language of trauma and the cures to break its cycle, but that did not come until much later.

Harris would tell himself "lots of wise and calming things. But the fear and stigma was so bad back then, I probably would not have listened."

Berry would say that things would be okay, even though it does not seem that way, and that sharing his status with the people closest to him would be "difficult and emotional for you but they will still love and support you just the same."

"Go to support groups, listen and learn from your peers who have more experience and appear to be knowledgeable and doing well with their treatment plans."

—Peter McLoyd

causing inequities in access."

Berry said that he developed a resistance to each new drug he would take, since his virus was was never fully suppressed.

"It was only later when we discovered combination therapy, and that it was the key to suppressing the virus and reducing viral load, that the treatment got better for everyone," said Berry. "But even those first powerful protease inhibitors were difficult to take, requiring handfuls of pills multiple times a day with debilitating side effects, but they kept me and others alive. It was only after 30 years of living with HIV that I was finally able to take one pill, once a day, with virtually no side effects."

McLoyd thought the protease inhibitors that were available would be included in his drug cocktail, but that did not happen. He received two drugs at the time, AZT and Epivir, and it was only after his viral load increased that his drug

Do not be afraid to ask for help and when you give back and help others along the way, you will get so much back in return. Do not ever give up hope."

In Munar's case, he would say "there is hope. The journey is hard but it imparts many valuable lessons."

Munar added that his only desire at that time was to grow older and now he is "eternally grateful" that happened.

For McLoyd, it would include asking questions and speaking up for himself when something did not feel right, which he did not do in the beginning.

"Go to support groups, listen and learn from your peers who have more experience and appear to be knowledgeable and doing well with their treatment plans," he added.

Speaking with other long-term HIV/AIDS survivors, Harris said he is most struck by when they

speaking about their fears of growing old and being alone, which is something they never thought they would have to do. They also speak frequently of grieving the loss of friends and having survivor's guilt.

Lewis-Thornton said that the most important thing she has heard from other survivors is that "we have survived a period where it was expected that we would die. We never made any long-term plans back then so in a lot of ways we had to begin to think about our lives in a different way. It became almost a re-definition of who we were, especially those of us who were AIDS activists; [it] had become the sum total of our lives. Later on, we had to reimagine our lives and, for me, that meant going to seminary and expanding my activism beyond HIV to women's issues."

Berry said he is "continually amazed by the inspiring stories of resilience and strength I have heard from other long-term survivors, and while some may be different than my story, and each story is unique, there is a common thread of humanity and perseverance woven through all their stories that resonate with me."

"There is a shared experience of fear and dread among those of us who lived through the years when treatments were not available and infections and death continued to spike," said Munar.

McLloyd said that it is a "mixed bag" and it "makes a big difference" to have people to talk to about one's HIV/AIDS status. He added that with the emergence of COVID-19, for himself and "other long-term survivors, HIV is no longer at the top of their list of concerns."

As for how comfortable they are in talking about their HIV/AIDS status, at first Lewis-Thornton did not share it with all but a handful of people until she thought she was dying, and now, due to speaking out, she became the first Black woman to tell her story nationally when she appeared on the cover of Essence magazine. She said her "life is an open book."

For Harris, being public about his status was never in question, however; he said that even today it surprises him "how many people tell me they still think it is a courageous act to openly talk about it. It makes me sad to think that after all this time; there is still fear and stigma not only in the broader community, but also within the LGBT community."

Berry said that working at TPAN for the past 28 years and being involved in HIV advocacy has given him the freedom to speak about his status, thanks to the support he received from his family, friends and co-workers. He added that many people do not have that option due to a variety of factors.

Munar said "no and yes" and that he is more comfortable in his body and it has taken time to unlearn "HIV shame and blame. I also reject the notion that I am the disease; it is part of me but I am so much more than just my serostatus."

"I have always felt comfortable talking about my HIV status—speaking at universities, high schools and other venues, McLloyd said. "It is a norm, but not something I relish doing, as I once did."

In terms of how they see the current COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, there are similarities and differences. They all

recognize the disparities in treatment on a variety of fronts for those who contract COVID-19 whether they are due to one's race or socioeconomic status or where they reside. This also continues to happen for those who contract HIV.

Lewis-Thornton said that unlike with HIV, she believes the medical community and politicians recognize the disparities and "are doing what they can to help reduce the numbers in Black and Brown communities."

"People do not believe they can contract COVID-19, that is until it happens to them, just like HIV," said Lewis-Thornton. "People do not do the simple things to keep themselves safe, like wear a mask, like use a condom."

Harris said that, in many ways, history is repeating itself due to "slow and incompetent action by the federal government along with weird conspiracy theories, outright denial and scapegoating by both President Reagan and Trump, and other high officials." He added that stigma and distrust of the medical community are the same now as they were during the early days of the HIV pandemic.

"We see many of the same disparities now that existed and still exist in the HIV pandemic, but in today's 24/7 news cycle, the internet and digital technology it is revealed in real time," said Berry. "I think there is an opportunity for us to use what we have hopefully learned from the past, to address these disparities in innovative ways, such as opening up vaccination centers in Black and Latinx communities, and providing education to address issues like medical distrust."

McLloyd pointed to the CDC data that show, like those with HIV/AIDS, "there are more COVID-19 cases, severe illnesses and deaths in minority communities nationwide. Many of us live in locations and conditions that negatively affect many health concerns including COVID-19."

Munar said that at Howard Brown, staff members are using their "three decades of experience in fighting HIV to inform our response to COVID-19. It comes down to establishing a trusting relationship and providing scientifically valid tools for the community to use in their context."

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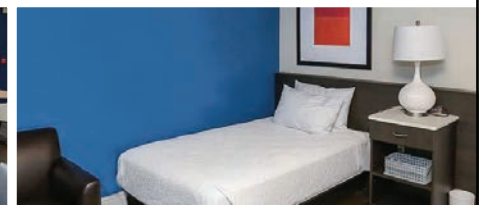


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HIV at 40

Sean Strub (center) getting arrested at a 1987 protest at the White House. Photo courtesy of Strub



Long-term AIDS survivor Sean Strub on his diagnosis, being a mayor and Larry Kramer

BY ANDREW DAVIS

To say Sean Strub is a fighter is almost the supreme understatement.

He was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in the mid-1980s—when having the disease was almost certainly a death sentence. (Even the doctor who diagnosed him passed away a couple years later.) In the mid-'90s—after becoming the first openly HIV-positive person to run for Congress, and well into a career as an activist—Strub's mortality seemed to be nearing an end after he founded POZ magazine, as his body was covered with advanced systems like Kaposi's sarcoma (a form of cancer).

However, things turned around for Strub, as antiretroviral therapy appeared on the scene, helping him immensely. And he didn't just survive; he thrived: Strub (and partner Xavier Morales) moved to Milford, Pennsylvania, where he purchased a hotel and, in 2017, became mayor of the city—which voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in 2016.

Windy City Times: Did you think we'd be 40 years in and not have a cure?

Sean Strub: Well, first of all, I didn't think I'd be 40 years in. But did I think we'd be 40 years in and not have a cure? Well, it depends on how one defines "cure." We have a treatment that's basically a functional cure. I was never that optimistic about something that would eradicate the

virus from the body, just because it doesn't work that way with viruses—so, in that sense, I'm not surprised.

In 1985, I was more concerned about making it to next year. In 2000—and in 2021—yeah, I thought things would get better, but I didn't necessarily expect a cure.

WCT: The very first time you heard of AIDS, was it called GRID [gay-related immune deficiency]?

SS: Actually, it was before that. The first thing I heard was a strange cancer affecting gay men in May of 1981, as a New York native. Then, over the summer, it started being called gay cancer and then gay-related immune deficiency.

WCT: I know you've talked about your journey in the book *Body Counts*, but I'm wondering if you could take us back to the day you were told you were positive?

SS: Sure. The day I was actually told, it wasn't an enormous surprise. Whatever this thing was, I thought I had it for several years. The late summer of 1985 was when I had a really bad case of shingles, and so the doctor said it could be AIDS-related complex (ARC); I was tested and had to go back two weeks later to get the results. I was still semi-shocked when I found it; it's life-changing news. The doctor said, "Look, Sean: These days, people have two years left."

I walked out of his office, and it was a beautiful day. I walked down the sidewalk and everything seemed surreal; every dream and aspiration, and

my friends and family were swirling around in my head. Yet the rest of the world was walking by, unaware and going about their lives. Then I was walking south along Broadway, heading toward Lincoln Center, and I was looking at the faces of people passing me on the sidewalk—and I was wondering what their lives were like. I wondered if they were going through this incredible existential drama in their heads, like I was.

That evening I saw my boyfriend and told him. He didn't want to get tested, and he had already exhibited symptoms. We didn't have cellphones or emails then, and I didn't call anyone on the pay phone with urgent news.

WCT: And from there, you became an activist. What compelled you to do so?

SS: I think it's a lot of things. First of all, having the time to engage in activism is a privilege, but there's also a sensibility. I grew up in a university town where people were protesting was common. I was already a political activist, so being a gay-rights activist was a logical extension.

Also, I didn't have a lot of shame about the diagnosis; I had more shame about coming out and being gay. So without that burden of shame, I felt free to learn more about what was going on around me—and to protest the injustices around me so things could be better. A lot of people were afraid of losing their jobs or families; I didn't have a wife and children, so I didn't have a secret to protect. So all those things helped me become an activist.

WCT: A lot of people were justifiably very upset with then-President Ronald Reagan and his very slow response to HIV/AIDS. However, you also criticized then-President Bill Clinton. Why was that?

SS: When Clinton was elected, in 1992, that was the first time the LGBT vote played an active role in a presidential race. And it became apparent to me that—and I don't want to say this in a critical way—that a whole lot of community leadership became part of the Clinton administration. Once you become part of the administration, you lose the latitude to criticize. Those in the administration wanted those on the outside to criticize.

Queer people were happy to be part of the administration; it was like pixie dust, if you will—but it also distracted from the clear-eyed approach the administration was or was not doing. And the administration was horrific when it came to syringe exchange. The science was absolutely clear that syringe exchange dramatically reduced transmission—and the Clinton administration continued to question the science. They were trying to obfuscate what scientists said, which was utterly ridiculous. That made a lot of us angry.

WCT: I talked with [writer] Edmund White once, and he told me that he went to hundreds of funerals for friends who died of AIDS.

SS: I actually didn't go to that many funerals; I went to memorial services and celebrations of life. I suspect Edmund was encompassing all of those when he said "funerals." But in terms of them, I didn't go to hundreds although I may have gone to a hundred. There were certainly many more that I knew about, although I remember going to two in one day—and there was a third I could've gone to.

WCT: Regarding the LGBTQ community, do you think there's a more cavalier attitude toward HIV/AIDS these days?

SS: Well, yes, but the consequences of getting HIV/AIDS are not as dire as they were years ago. Having said that, do I think people are too casual about it? Yes—we're still getting a lot of transmission, but I think that has to do with who has access to healthcare as well as what type of relationship they might have with the criminal-justice system.

The challenges in reducing HIV transmission today are not so much singular to the virus as they are related to a broader set of circumstances in people's lives and structural elements in their lives.

WCT: Another giant of the HIV/AIDS community, Larry Kramer, passed away last year. Could you talk about the impact he had?

SS: Larry was one of several people who had an enormous impact on the epidemic globally. Larry's contributions could be looked at in two important ways. One, he helped us to find our voice. He helped us to find the anger against the injustice perpetrated against people with HIV. You know, Harriet Tubman freed slaves and she said, "I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves." And Larry helped a lot of queer people understand they were oppressed. In that sense, Larry was the megaphone who showed us how effective anger could be. He gave us permission to express the anger smolder-

ing within us.

Larry also believed that queer people were better than others. I don't know if queer people are better, but there are certainly ways we contribute to society. I once had dinner with Harry Hay, founder of Radical Faeries and the Mattachine Society. I was wearing a suit and tie, and he made fun of me because of that, saying that I was an assimilationist. He said that we're different from heterosexuals in that what we contribute to society is unique. And Larry really celebrated and loved gay people—and helped us to love ourselves.

But there are others. [Recently,] we lost someone who was just as much as giant: [physician] Joseph Sonnabend. Not only did he really invent safer sex—probably the most important contribution to prevention in the history of the epidemic—but he advocated for the aggressive treatment of opportunistic infections, including prophylactically, changed millions of lives. In the 1980s, when PCP [pneumocystis pneumonia] was the number-one killer of people with AIDS, he prescribed sulfa drugs for people with impaired immune systems. Yet it took the federal government years to issue an advisory, even though the science had been behind it and Joe had been prescribing it for years. A delegation of people had gone to Washington to beg [Dr. Anthony] Fauci to issue an advisory; during those years, 17,000 people died of pneumonia—overwhelmingly, gay men.

Joe was phenomenal, and he advocated for patients' rights. He was influential in saving so

many lives. He was more private, as Larry was more public, though. Losing someone like Larry hurts because so many people identified with him.

WCT: Let's talk about your politics. I saw the movie *My Friend, the Mayor* [which chronicles Strub's mayoral win in Milford, Pennsylvania]. Did your win later give you hope regarding the 2020 presidential election?

SS: That's an interesting question. It gave me hope for the democracy. There was an opportunity to show, on a local level, that democracy can prevail if people participate. The role of money on the national level can be dispiriting and prevent people from participating. Our campaign showed that democracy works. So, at a time when it clear democracy was under assault—more so since that election—here we were demonstrating that it could work. And it also reinforced my belief that if we could get past this partisan divide, things could work. Things have to change from the ground up—how we relate to our neighbors, how we engage with others.

On the day that the Supreme Court gave George Bush the White House, in 2000, Gore Vidal wrote me a letter and he said, "Oh, well. [The country is] 224 years old. She's had a good run, but all good things must come to an end." He had been predicting the end of the American democratic experiment. Gore has died but I wish he were alive to see the film and see that, yeah, there's still some life here.

WCT: Interestingly, we seem to be at a point where we can't even agree on the actual

facts—whereas, previously, we had different opinions about facts.

SS: Maybe it's my imagination, but I've looked at a local Facebook pages, but there seems to be a lot less of the QAnon items and equally ridiculous things. I don't know if that's because of what social media has imposed, but you know what? I think some people have learned to be a little more skeptical; if something sounds outrageous, they should check things. Maybe it's peaked.

But I think something that has made us vulnerable is the degradation of our public-school system. Over the last 40 years, it's significantly declined in quality. The teachers haven't gotten worse, but they have fewer resources and bigger classes. People don't have the same capacity for critical thinking, for reading, and for absorbing and processing information. We need to rebuild our public-school system.

WCT: Do you ever see yourself running for Congress again?

SS: No. Maybe if there's some dramatic change to the system. I have so much empathy for people in Congress because they have to spend so much time fundraising. It detracts from the quality of the governance we get. I think it's degrading to public servants—people we want to act in our best interest. As Barney Frank used to say, "It's the only job in the world where you're supposed to be elected and follow your conscience and do what's right—but you spend half your time begging for money from people who want you to do something else."

WCT: What's the most important thing you've learned about yourself?

SS: The most important thing is how much I have to learn. I've learned that no one has all the answers. I've learned my own weaknesses and I've learned how important it is to be close to people you love and who love you back.

I've also learned—through decades of political, human-rights and social-justice work—how fragile our gains are and how quickly people take the progress of the generation before them for granted. And that's across the board: You can look at reproductive rights and women's health, the civil-rights movement and AIDS. Progress is fragile and [involves] a never-ending commitment to keep and expand those rights.

WCT: Yes; progress can be lost in buckets and gained in drops.

SS: It is. We've seen, in all sorts of ways with the LGBT community, many countries going backward—and things could get much worse. When people in some faraway country are losing rights, we better pay attention because we could be next.

WCT: What would you like your legacy to be?

SS: When I wrote the book, I told my story to that point. What come to mind are young people I'd like to inspire. I love it when I hear from people who've read *Body Counts* and seen the film. I want as much of my life as possible to be an inspiring example. That's the legacy I most treasure.

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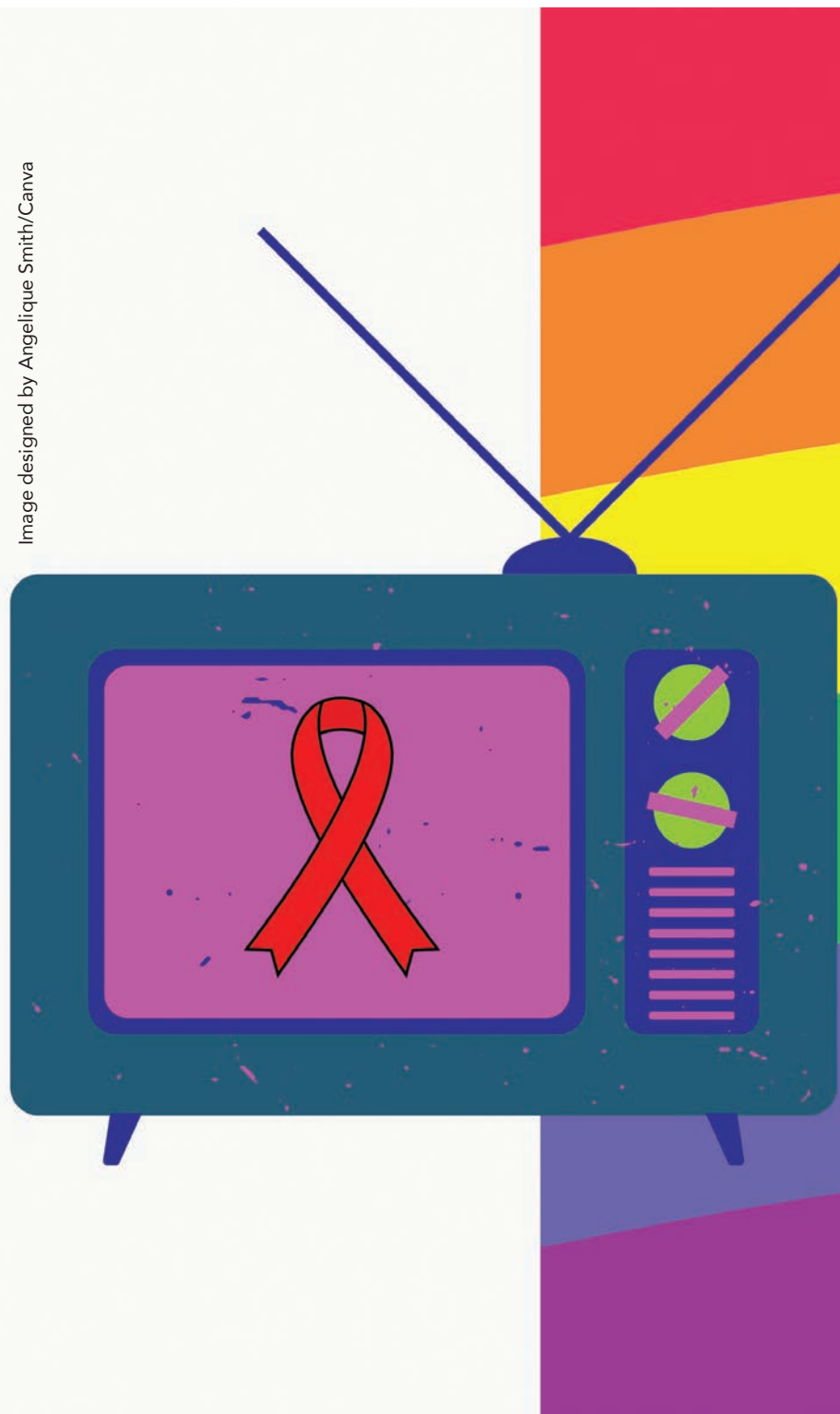
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Forty years later, still a call for accurate HIV-positive REPRESENTATION

BY ANGELIQUE SMITH

Image designed by Angelique Smith/Canva



*"I can look back at a show like *Girlfriends* and see how they dramatized living with HIV; how the character made a quick appearance and then died. For the time that it came out in the early 2000s, the reality of living with HIV had already started to change. I haven't really seen anything today on TV that presents a modern way of looking at living with the virus or anything that reflects my own reality." Isaiah*, a 41-year old, African-American gay man who has been living with HIV for 16 years.*

Forty years after the first reported cases of HIV, and at a time when nearly six in 10 Americans wrongfully think that "it is important to be careful around people living with HIV to avoid catching it," with 89% agreeing that there is still a stigma around HIV (GLAAD and Gilead's State of HIV Stigma survey, 2020), the populace remains in dire need of both education about and positive representation of those living with HIV in television, film and media.

Television and film can be used as an important communications tool and have a lasting impact. A study found that a statistic mentioned on *Grey's Anatomy*—that HIV-positive mothers receiving treatment have a 98% chance of having a healthy baby—both educated and was retained by viewers almost two months later (Television as a Health Educator: A Case Study of *Grey's Anatomy*, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2008).

Early representation of HIV-positive characters came with the 1985 film *Buddies* and the made-for-TV movie *An Early Frost*, months later, which is often seen as a precursor to *Philadelphia*. While other network shows and soap operas have introduced HIV-positive characters over the years, currently, there are only three regular characters who are living with HIV on television in the 2020-2021 season across broadcast, cable and streaming services—and all three are on FX's *Pose* (GLAAD's *Where Are We On TV* report, 2020).

Windy City Times spoke with two Chicago residents living with HIV, in addition to a medical professional, local cultural scholars, and an executive from GLAAD about the state of HIV-positive character representation.

Windy City Times: Understanding the importance of accurate representation for HIV-positive characters, are there any pivotal moments in queer cinema or on television that did the job of driving greater acceptance?

Dr. Jennifer Brier, director and professor of gender and women's studies and history, UIC: *Philadelphia* was a key film. The history of the representation of LGBT characters—and, particularly, people who are living with HIV/AIDS who may, at the time, have been called "AIDS victims"—involves a change in nomenclature that has always been complicated. While visibility is critical, actually seeing accurate and empathetic representation of human struggle and experience is deeply important and one of the ways that change happens.

Rich Ferraro, chief communications officer, GLAAD: You can't look at *Philadelphia* without looking at the context of the time it was released. Having Tom Hanks play that role brought the discussion of people living with HIV to broad

mainstream America at a time when people living with HIV in mainstream storylines were all but invisible. If you look at shows like *Noah's Arc*, that highlight the nuances of living with HIV and the intersection of living with HIV, being queer and being Black in America today, that's one thing that we see in shows like *Pose*, as well. These characters are not just speaking about living with HIV, they're speaking about being trans, being Black and about intersectional issues.

Mack*, a person of color who's been HIV-positive for almost two decades: Even before I was diagnosed, I remember watching *ER* and the African-American female doctor [Gloria Reuben's Jeanie Boulet] was diagnosed with HIV. I was surprised because she's wasn't gay. I had to do research to understand that this is not a gay disease and it's not a male disease. Straight women can have it.

Brier: *Philadelphia* had a really important and powerful effect on U.S. culture, but it also showed things in a very particular way. Which is a way that we know has been much more of a myth than a reality. You see a white, gay man dying of AIDS and Tom Hanks was certainly not gay, not infected with HIV, not dying of AIDS, and so it's part of the performance of that. But it also served to reiterate through the representation the idea that AIDS was a white, gay male disease. Those are myths that, unfortunately, have real currency.

Mack: From everything I saw [on TV and in film], I thought that HIV worked really, really fast. I thought, "Do I have a week? Do I have two weeks? Do I have a month?" That was my first concern: the timing of the disease and how quickly it can take hold of you.

Dr. Maya Green, regional medical director, Howard Brown: When people I see have a story that's related to something they saw in movies, we sometimes get *Dallas Buyer's Club*, especially with medicines. Some people are still on it, but it was kind of rough to take. The main thing I tell them is, "Whatever that person's truth is, it spoke to a time when we didn't have medical technology to develop medicines that helped people living with HIV to live a long, healthy life." Then I usually show a chart of all these medicines that usually work, and let them know that we do have to customize them to individual needs. I tell them, "The medicine and the medical technology is updated, but a lot of times, not only in the community, but in the health care industry, we haven't updated the conversation."

Brier: You see a TV show like *Pose*, where the characters are much more racially diverse, the actors are trans and queer people of color. They're talking about the same moment in time as *Philadelphia*, but it's a totally different representation of what survival looked like, how communities managed to create possibilities for freedom, survival and care for one another. They were made 20+ years apart, so you see how historical thinking has evolved about AIDS, but also how we've tried to unpack the idea that AIDS was once a white, gay male disease. AIDS has always been an illness that is structured by both sexuality and race.

WCT: How has HIV-positive representation changed over the last four decades? Any notable trends?

Ferraro: If you look back to a lot of the LGBTQ-inclusive content from the '80s and '90s, ... The Hours, Angels in America and Rent really opened up people's eyes to what living with HIV was like and reinforced the importance of talking about HIV prevention. Then if you look at the late '90s to the 2000s, there were shows like Queer As Folk and, more recently, How to Get Away with Murder, that included HIV as part of the narrative when speaking about LGBTQ lives, and showcased characters leading long and healthy lives. HIV was a part of their story, but not the center of their story.

Dr. Nick Davis, associate professor, English and gender and sexuality studies, Northwestern: One surprising trend in film is that there aren't more HIV/AIDS narratives that don't feel like they have to be returned to the moment of initial response in the '80s. I think that our portraits of activism and community impact in the early to late '80s get more textured and inclusive as time goes on. I'm just surprised there are not more stories of people living with and managing HIV now; that's something that still feels pretty under-exploited.

Brier: I would argue, as a historian of AIDS, Pose is probably one of the most positive representations of what it means to survive, what it takes to survive, and what it means to have a community that helps you survive of any [television shows] I've ever seen in the last 25 years of doing this work. What I love about Pose in many ways is that it's about why communities of color were the leaders in thinking about systems of care when the state was not interested in that.

Davis: I also do appreciate that I remember the first years of seeing characters who were conveyed to me as having AIDS were always dying from it. It's refreshing to feel like not every character with HIV/AIDS is medicalized in the same way as it was in the past, or presented using all the tropes that used to be so common—it's not all about Kaposi sarcoma, or being on a deathbed. We've gotten better at not limiting ourselves to that archive of images, but I would love to see a more robust idea of what we're doing instead.

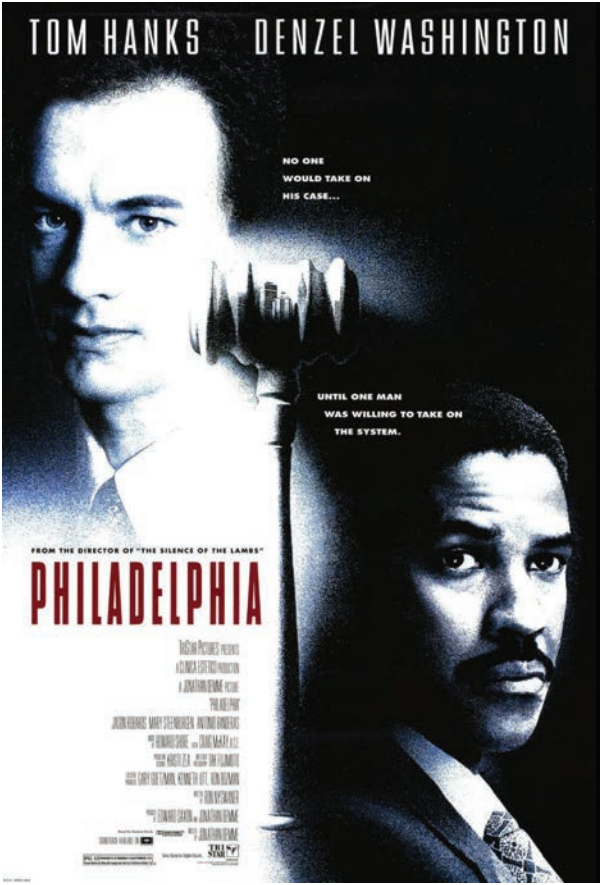
WCT: What are your thoughts on whether it's Hollywood's responsibility to educate viewers? And what are good solutions to the problem of accurate portrayals?

Ferraro: I think Hollywood can play a big role, but Hollywood can't and should not do it alone. National and local LGBTQ organizations need to continue to prioritize sharing stories about people living with HIV, speaking about HIV treatment and prevention. But also starting to introduce discussions around PrEP and HIV testing because those are discussions that queer people should be having more of.

Brier: I think it's all of our responsibilities. I think we need more representation of HIV-positive people in literature, in poetry, not just popular culture. We need it in scholarship and to be seen as scholarship, we need it in real comprehensive sex and health education. We need it in adult education where we actually talk about the ways that we love and are in relationship with one another. We need it in health care if we're going to talk about what it means to be healthy.

Green: The best place to update narratives and the conversation is in the community. A patient is with me 15 minutes. They're going to be with their community, their family, their loved ones for 23 hours and 45 minutes out of the day. When a person is seeing [negative stereotypes about HIV on TV], it helps to have a support group they can trust to help while they unpack that. Unfortunately, the fear of living with HIV is what people recall from the media when people show up in the office. You have some [television] shows that are doing the work of updating that narrative, which is great, but in the health care industry we also have to update the narrative.

Ferraro: Hollywood had been a leader in telling HIV stories in the early '90s and now is suffering from nearly complete invisibility of people living with HIV. So, our commitment was released earlier this year with the "Where We Are on TV" report: We're challenging Hollywood to add characters living with HIV storylines.



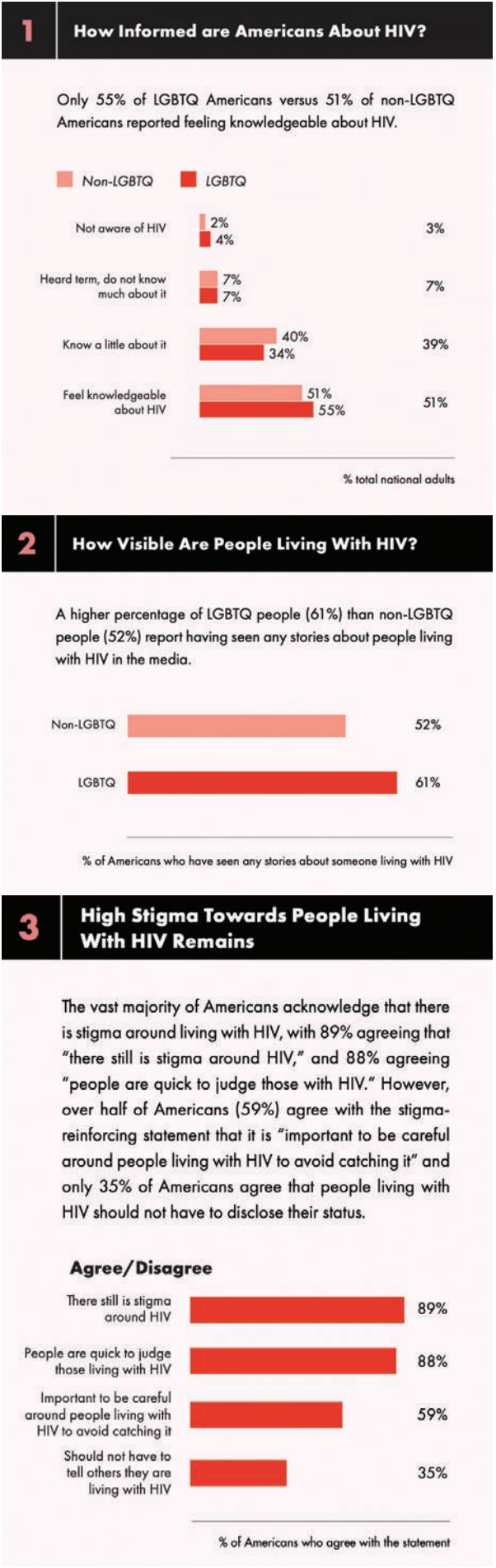
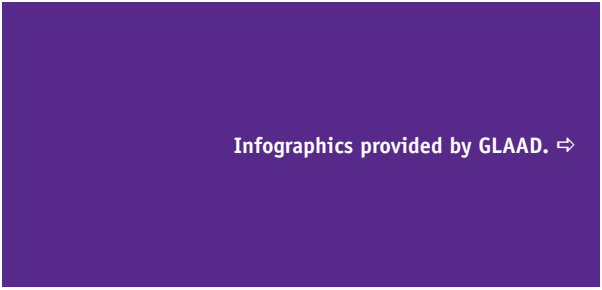
In 1993, Philadelphia (right) brought HIV issues to the big screen. Poster courtesy of TriStar Pictures

That commitment will turn into a community working group later this year made up of HIV advocates, people who work in HIV prevention, especially across the U.S. South, and people working in Hollywood who have a deep understanding of HIV and how to create storylines with HIV that are fair and accurate.

Green: Stigma is an infectious disease of the mind and it kills more people than HIV ever could. I say this every chance that I get: to kill the stigma, we vaccinate with education. We have to fight stigmas by leading with facts, and facts are, if you get screened early, and you start on medicine early, you can live a long, healthy life.

Dr. Jennifer Brier is the author of *Infectious Ideas: US Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, and the recently launched "I'm Still Surviving," an online exhibit of the oral histories of women living with HIV, at StillSurviving.net. Rich Ferraro is the chief communications officer for GLAAD and executive producer of the GLAAD Media Awards. Dr. Maya Green is the regional medical director for the south and west regions of Howard Brown. Dr. Nick Davis is the author of *The Desiring-Image: Gilles Deleuze and Contemporary Queer Cinema*.

*Names have been changed at the request of the interviewees.



TANIA UNZUETA



Tania Unzueta (on microphone).
Photo by Ervin Lopez

Fighting for justice, one cause at a time

BY MELISSA WASSERMAN

LGBTQ, immigration and political activist Tania Unzueta has spent the last three years living in Georgia involved in political and electoral organizing. She returned to Chicago in January with her partner.

Unzueta came to Chicago from Mexico City with her parents and sister when she was 10. Her family members are immigration and labor rights activists—as a child, Unzueta went to rallies and protests for various causes.

“I’ve always seen organizing as an option,” Unzueta said.

A teenage Unzueta, who was undocumented, was faced with the issue of her immigration status for the first time when she was in high school and getting ready to apply for colleges. This, she said, was her first experience of activism for herself and her community.

She went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in gender studies and a graduate degree from the Latin American and Latino Studies program from University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

Around 2010 she did a lot of organizing around undocumented youth and that is when she said she decided to lean into it. Among her many experiences, she was a volunteer with a national group of young people fighting for the DREAM Act, co-founded the Immigrant Youth Justice League, worked on different campaigns including

the Not One More campaign, Jesús “Chuy” García’s mayoral campaign in 2015, and she worked on Stacey Abrams’ gubernatorial campaign in Georgia. Additionally, she is a former journalist and public radio producer.

Unzueta, who identifies as queer, is the political director and co-founder of Mijente—a hub for Latinx and Chicanx people to build campaigns and connect around racial, economic, gender and climate justice.

She is also co-founder and on the board of directors at Organized Communities Against Deportations (OCHAD).

“Part of our values as an organization and why I’m at Mijente is we believe in local people making decisions for themselves,” she said, explaining Mijente always partners with local organizations.

She said when she started Mijente she was coming out of immigrants’ rights organizing, particularly around deportation defense, but she had an interest in getting into electoral and political work.

She observed, when she went to work for the Garcia campaign in 2015, that the biggest problem reported in Chicago was that Latinos did not vote, so turnout was always low.

“So we have the problem where Latinos were the majority of our constituency and everyone was afraid the vote wouldn’t happen,” said Unzueta. “So, I feel like I’ve been spending the

last five years at Mijente really thinking through what’s missing in political organizing, what needs to happen differently, what do we know from grassroots organizing that could help political work?”

“I just think there’s people who aren’t excited about electoral politics and what we’re trying to do within the organization is talk about the different strategies that it takes to create change and that includes outside the state, within the state, and non-electoral grassroots work as well as political work,” Unzueta said.

Over the last year, Unzueta has run the entire political program at Mijente, and her roles included supervising teams in Arizona, North Carolina and Georgia for the general election, supporting local candidates and campaigning against Donald Trump. For the U.S. Senate runoff elections in Georgia that took place this past January, she ran the organization’s political campaign in that state for the Democratic candidates. Unzueta explained that her responsibilities covered designing the plan, figuring out who to target and why, choosing the messaging, recruiting people on the ground and making decisions about payment for canvassers, among other things.

In Georgia, particularly for the runoffs, Unzueta said that she and her team succeeded in reaching every Latino voter in the state.

“I feel like it’s part of why the political parties and candidates don’t choose to invest in Latino

communities because it takes a lot of resources to get us there and it’s also why it needs to be done different than the way it is,” said Unzueta. “It’s worth it to invest in these people to be able to allow our voices to be heard.”

As for the successes in this political work, Unzueta said that being able to reach every single Latino person in Georgia for the runoffs is something that has never been done in the state before.

“So we did a lot of microtargeting, for example, and the targeted messages for the community—and I think that was a huge success,” said Unzueta. “I feel like having an independent political vehicle that’s progressive, that’s organizing Latinos nationally is important. Being able to participate for the first time in a presidential election is a win for Mijente.”

When asked about efforts for future elections, Unzueta explained it is about figuring out how to support people who are interested in mobilizing in their own states.

“None of the work in Arizona and Georgia or North Carolina would’ve happened without people being really invested in it,” she said.

“It doesn’t mean the only way of participating has to be voting or has to be doing political work,” she said. “I think there’s a diversity of work that we could be doing and people just need to be involved in some way.”

Unzueta said she is driven by the idea that that things can get better in time.

“I got into organizing because I was seeing the different ways in which my life was being impacted by being undocumented for most of my life and the only way that I was able to figure out how to get into school or how to find resources, how to find people who were telling me I couldn’t do stuff, is to organize and so I feel like when I see injustices in my community and in my family,” she said. “My experience has been by coming together and making a plan and figuring out how to leverage your power.”

Unzueta said an important lesson from her years of organizing is to not just criticize, but to propose solutions.

“I think we spend a lot of time as organizers talking about what’s wrong and don’t often have answers for what is the thing that we are suggesting,” said Unzueta. “So, I feel like that’s part of the challenge for us this year too, like even if we have criticisms of the Biden administration, it’s not about saying what they’re doing wrong, but actually being able to figure out what can work and what are we actually proposing going forward.”

Chicago Latinx, LGBTQ activist and Mijente member Emmanuel Garcia has been friends with Unzueta for about 15 years. They met working at a radio station.

“Tania’s fearless,” said Garcia.

Saying she inspires constructiveness in activism work and finding solutions, he described her as “an incredible organizer,” a storyteller and someone who also works behind the scenes, as well as someone who would coach and motivate others to get their point across.

“It wasn’t just that Latinx people are left out of electoral politics, it’s like but what are we going to do about that and so you can see clearly

“I think that there’s a diversity of work that we could be doing and people just need to be involved in some way.”
—Tania Unzueta

what the outcome of that was for her in Georgia and all the places that she’s been to,” he pointed out. “For me that’s the reminder; what are the solutions and how are we being more proactive about what we’re building.”

For future generations, Unzueta insisted that institutions can change. She shared a piece of advice she said she personally learned early in her activism: “Just because something is against the law, just because something is set in the institutions’ rules, doesn’t mean it can’t change. I think the history of immigration and the history of the LGBTQ community are great examples of that. To think just because an institution, a government, an organization has a way of doing things, I actually think our experience and our organizing and all of the ways in which we come together can change those things.”

To continue organizing efforts, Unzueta suggested staying safe, being forgiving—and being patient.

“Understand that some things are going to take longer or be less efficient or just less clear and that’s okay,” she said. “Maybe be creative. ... It’s a time where we need new strategies and new ways of doing things.”

Justice might not take breaks, but Unzueta understands and practices work-life balance.

She believes that life varies and is not always 50/50. Sometimes the organizing requires a 15-hour work day or an all-nighter, but it is necessary to take a vacation.

“We shouldn’t punish ourselves when that happens,” she explained. “We should take the time on all of that to do what needs to be done and at the same time there’s times when actually that’s not needed. There’s times when we can say no because we can. There’s times when we need the vacation. When you have to step back, other people have to step forward. I think that’s a thing to keep in mind.”

For more information, visit mijente.net.



Tania Unzueta (center).
Photo by Sarah Ji-Rhee

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PrEP options likely to change following Truvada patent expiration

BY MATT SIMONETTE

Among the myriad challenges facing HIV/AIDS advocates and healthcare providers has been increasing use of pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, among persons at risk for HIV transmission. A PrEP intervention, which usually consists of taking the oral medication Truvada, has been shown to decrease the risk of transmission by more than 90 percent.

Truvada was approved for PrEP use by the Food and Drug Administration in 2012 and, since then, has been widely prescribed by physicians to help at-risk patients prevent HIV transmission (it was earlier used to treat persons living with HIV). But Truvada's patent expiration in 2020 means both generic options for consumers are forthcoming and that a competing drug, Descovy, by the same manufacturer, is already on the market.

Some advocates are looking forward to having lower-cost options available. AIDS Foundation of Chicago (AFC) Senior Director of Prevention Advocacy and Gay Men's Health Jim Pickett suspects that "lower drug costs will lower the cost of access and alleviate some pressure on the system."

He added, "With PrEP, the costs are not just about the drug. There are costs affiliated with seeing your doctor, having blood work done, being tested for HIV and STI's. It's important to remember that services that come along with PrEP are part of the program—PrEP isn't just a prescription. If our system can spend less on the drug, there's arguably more money to cover those other things which can be prohibitive for people."

The cost of Truvada—which is a combination of the drugs known generically as tenofovir disoproxil fumarate and emtricitabine—has indeed been a key deterrent to widespread PrEP implementation. A month's supply of the medication is often \$1,500-2,000. Nevertheless, many insurers cover Truvada in their formularies, and the medication's manufacturer, Foster City, California-based Gilead Sciences, provides consumer assistance for monthly co-payments their plans require.

Various public health agencies have also made PrEP access a central component to long-term strategies that eliminate new HIV transmissions, such as the Getting to Zero initiative launched

in Illinois in late 2018. The federal government announced a similar program with PrEP interventions playing a central role in early 2019.

Nevertheless, PrEP adoption numbers remain far behind where advocates and providers want to see them. Getting the message about PrEP to white gay men has been a relatively minimal challenge, but communicating that same message to diverse audiences at risk, such as transgender women or young Black men, remains problematic. Usage in the southern United States, where a large number of new HIV transmissions take place, is also low.

In late 2019, Gilead announced it would donate a five-year supply of Truvada to 200,000 people. Their Truvada patent expired in late 2020. The company reached an exclusivity agreement for six months Israeli pharmaceutical manufacturer Teva for a generic version of tenofovir disoproxil fumarate and emtricitabine. Starting in spring 2021, Teva's exclusivity window expires and any manufacturer can produce a generic version of tenofovir disoproxil fumarate and emtricitabine.

Gilead still intends to remain a player in manufacturing and distributing medications for PrEP, however. In 2019, it received approval for use of Descovy as a PrEP intervention and has aggressively marketed the new drug as a replacement for Truvada. Google users who search "Truvada generic" will likely spot an advertisement for Descovy toward the top of their results.

Among the advantages of Descovy, according to Gilead, are reduced chances of complications to kidneys or bone density, which are stated side-effects to Truvada. But Descovy shares the same high cost as Truvada, about \$16,600-20,000 a year, according to aidsmap.com.

Many advocates and providers say that there is no need for a "mass exodus" from Truvada to Descovy for PrEP users, Pickett said.

"In terms of prescribing for PrEP, the vast majority of people using Truvada for PrEP have absolutely zero clinical need to switch over to Descovy," he added. "The only clinical reason to switch would be if you have some underlying kidney or bone disease, or if Truvada is giving your kidneys a hard time."

Gilead could not provide a spokesperson to comment on Descovy by this article's deadline.



Photo
by Matt
Simonette

Shortly after Descovy was approved for PrEP in October 2019, Daniel O'Day, Gilead's chairman and CEO, said the new medication nevertheless "provides a new HIV prevention option that matches Truvada's high efficacy with statistically significant improvements in renal and bone safety, which can be an important consideration as people at risk increasingly use PrEP for longer periods of time."

Prior to her appointment as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Rochelle Walensky, MD, was lead author on a March 2020 Annals of Internal Medicine study which concluded that mitigating for Truvada's side-effects with a new medication was outweighed by the benefits of a lower-cost generic substitute for Truvada. Other researchers also have expressed concern that Descovy has not been tested on as diverse a population as Truvada has been.

"We already are seeing insurance companies pointing people to the generic alternative—when you are prescribed PrEP, the insurance company might cover the generic form of Truvada," Pickett said. "They may or may not be inclined to cover Truvada itself. We are also seeing insurance companies put in utilization-management for Descovy, so if you are prescribed Descovy, the doctor has to show clinical need."

Gilead has also been involved in extensive litigation with the federal government regarding the PrEP-related patents. The CDC sued the company in 2019, maintaining that it had not been properly compensated for federal researchers' contri-

butions to Truvada and Descovy's development. In January 2021, a federal judge rejected the Justice Department's motion to dismiss Gilead's counterclaims that the federal government had been in breach of key contracts, so the litigation will continue.

But for now, a key challenge for stakeholders remains getting the costs under control. Using PrEP represents a collective commitment of time and money for patients, providers and insurers.

In the years ahead, the PrEP landscape will likely change even further. An injectable version of the intervention has proven to be as effective as oral applications. In such a scenario, the medication cabotegravir could be injected and offer two months' worth of protection for patients who don't wish to take a pill every day.

Pickett said he didn't foresee injectable PrEP completely replacing pills however, noting that compliance challenges might only shift for some consumers. While the injection saves the patient from the responsibility of taking a pill, they'd still need a bimonthly appointment to receive it.

"I don't see it as replacing [oral medication]—I see it as being additive," Pickett said. "I see it drawing in people who struggle with PrEP because it is a pill, or aren't interested because it's a pill. Overall, if we do it right and create support systems that make it easy for people to get their shots—imagine being able to do it at Walgreens—I'll be super-excited about it. It means people having more options and more protection."

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